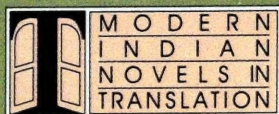


MACMILLAN



G.V. Krishna Rao

Puppets



Translated from the Telugu
original
by D. Kesava Rao

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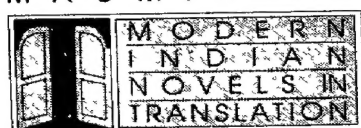
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*Clouds hold the water drawn from the ocean,
but it is the clouds to which people look.*

— Jnaneshwar

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G. V. Krishna Rao
PUPPETS
(Keelubommalu)



Translated from the Telugu original by
D. KESAVA RAO

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First Published in Telugu in 1951

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

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Our project of translations, a collaboration between writers, translators, sponsor and publisher has already released 18 novels including this one. The first 11 were published a year ago. By the end of the century we hope to finish the programme of 55 novels. Our goal is to try and paint a vivid and general picture of Indian life as revealed by serious post-Independence fiction in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Oriya, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Hindi.

Every language represented in this series carries with it a sense of community or place, or of being "located" in a unique sensibility. We hope that the works selected express those modes of feeling, perceiving and believing that relate to one of the world's oldest, unbroken traditions.

With the progress of research, scholarship has moved more and more towards narrower fields of specialization. So this makes a survey of a whole field of operations necessary for onlookers whether or not they are "shareholders" in the enterprise of translation.

Even within India most people do not know the anthropology, literature or history of a linguistic group other than their own. For them, we hope to unseal in English, at least a few works from languages which they may not have the time or ability to learn with the kind of missionary enthusiasm that some people expect everyone to have.

Others, raised outside India, (whether of Indian or non-Indian origin) may need some help with references historical, religious, philosophical or cultural. For those readers we have prepared glossaries because we believe that one way of understanding India is to read the literatures of her complex and diverse regions. I am sure there are more eloquent visions but if these translations help to widen the literary horizons of our

readers even slightly, they would not have been published in vain.

This project has been made possible by the generosity of the MR. AR. Educational Society, Madras. Known to us, there has not so far been a similar programme of translations funded by the private sector.

MINI KRISHNAN
Project Editor

ABOUT THE SPONSORS

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When Mrs MR. Omayal Achi and her son Mr MR. Arunachalam died in an air crash on 12 October 1976, the considerable fortune they left behind was converted into the MR. Omayal Achi MR. Arunachalam Trust by their heirs.

Mr A.M.M. Arunachalam is the Managing Trustee, and his three sisters the Founding Trustees of the Trust, the chief functions of which are education and health care in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India. The Omayal Achi College of Nursing, Tamil Nadu is run by the Trust.

Later, a separate body was established called the MR. AR. Educational Society which set up the MR. Arunachalam Vocational Training Centre and the Selva Vinayakar Middle School, all in rural areas. The aims of the Society besides literacy, also include the promotion of Indian literature and scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

The Telugu novel, since its beginnings in the 1870's, has always shown a strong commitment to contemporary socio-political issues. For a little over a century, it stayed close to the rapidly changing social scenario recording every pulsation and vibration of social life with utmost sensitivity. Critical realism became the fundamental form of narrativity and the novel provided the forum for critiquing all forms of domination and authority including colonialism, feudalism, the caste system and structure and patriarchal ideology. In the post-Independence period a serious indictment of the new regime and the all pervasive corruption became the single important motif in fiction. Around the same time, the Telugu novel entered a phase of formal experimentation as the writers had, by then, experienced the influence of some of the important intellectual and ideological developments such as Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxian socialism and European existentialism. The modernist writings of the West, and the growing popularity of the Progressive Writers' Movement at home too had considerable impact on the creative minds of these times. G.V. Krishna Rao's *Keelubommalu* (1951) belongs to this phase and exemplifies all the important developments of this period.

Krishna Rao, a poet, playwright, novelist and critic writes out of an acute social consciousness that is vitally concerned with politics and society. His focus is not only on the complex socio-political changes occurring in the world around him but also on the psychological conflicts and moral dilemmas experienced by men and women living in this transitional phase. His fiction has a progressive and reformist message and he strongly urges the need for individual autonomy as a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of the "whole man."

In *Keelubommalu*, the condition of post-Independence

politics is examined from both psychological and progressive points of view with an emphasis on the general moral decline that has beset the newly independent nation. The title *Kee-lubommalu* (Puppets) hints at the mechanistic nature of human life. The levers here are controlled by the corrupt social system. Individual lives are determined socially, culturally and psychologically to such an extent that independent thinking and initiative are altogether eliminated, and all men and women are reduced to the level of mere puppets. This didactic tale puts forth the moral message in unambiguous terms. As one of the characters in the novel Dr. Vasudeva Sastri says: "A society will never progress unless its men and women learn to think independently and act according to the dictums of their conscience."

In his preface to the novel, Rao disclaims affiliation to any particular political party. And he says that his work springs from pure artistic experience. In fact he appeals to readers to set aside their political interests and read his work with an open mind. However, the narrative and the authorial intrusions testify to an influence of socialist ideology on Krishna Rao.

The novel draws its inspiration from Johan Bojer's *The Power of a Lie* (1903) which deals with the consequences of forgery. Rao shows how a lie, once uttered, describes its own irreversible course misguiding the lives of all in its path. Pullayya, one of the respectable landlords of the village stands surety to Chandrasekharam when the latter secures a loan for his paper factory. Sekharam's business runs into difficulties and Pullayya begins to regret his action which he now views as a folly. He is particularly worried about his wife's reaction to the situation. So when his daughter Sita quizzes him about it, he gets away with a half truth saying she should not regard gossip seriously.

This is the beginning of Pullayya's moral fall, and once he starts sliding, there is no stopping his decline. Pullayya's wife files a case of forgery against Sekharam and the strife between two individuals soon assumes the form of a village feud, as people take sides and add fuel to fire. More interestingly, this

provides the opportunity for settling scores in all old rivalries in the village, and in each case the individual issue metamorphoses into a social cause. Anarchy is let loose, and violence, bloodshed, arson and murder rack the village. Finally, the lie asserts its power: the innocent is convicted and the guilty acquitted. Ironically, the novel ends with the symbolic unveiling of Pullayya's portrait, and the emergence of Pullayya as a man of the people — "Sardar Pullayya" as he is now acclaimed by the people.

Keelubommalu may be described as a novel of ideas as the novelist places most of his characters in relation to some social or political idea. Men and women here represent the new personality types that have emerged in post Independence India: (i) young men attracted by the visions of a socialist utopia, failing miserably at the pragmatic level as in the case of Chandrasekharam (ii) a new brand of women activists who champion public causes for their own personal ends as represented by Ammayamma (iii) feudal lords like Pullayya and Mallayya who continue to thrive on the policy of divide and rule (iv) a vanishing breed of loyal men who live by conviction but lack the courage to oppose injustice as exemplified by Satyanaranaya Pantulu (v) frustrated middle-class women seeking freedom from the shackles of orthodoxy as in the case of Padma (vi) a small minority of idealists inspired by the Gandhian vision facing defeat and disillusionment in their encounter with a corrupt political system, as represented by Vasudeva Sastri; and (vii) restless youngsters urging radical reform, as in the case of Rama Rao. This allegorical mode of characterisation enables Krishna Rao to project the complexities of an entire society within the parameters of personal and social relationships in a representative community.

What distinguishes Rao's work from the social novel then popular in Telugu literature is his sensitive analysis of the inner life of each of these characters. The author is acutely conscious of the private worlds and secret lives of his characters and how this intimate sphere of experience interacts with the social ethos. None of the characters is a hero or a villain in the conventional sense of the term. Each one is a victim, a

victim whose life is conditioned by an oppressive socio-economic system. Each one is a puppet flailing its limbs to the controlled orchestration of strings held by a corrupt society. For instance Pullayya, even as he pursues the fake case, suffers intense psychological turmoil. Sleeplessness, guilt, paranoia and fear haunt him. He invents innumerable lies for his own survival, rationalizes his fraudulence, deceiving himself into believing that he is fighting a lawful battle for the good of the village. The complexity of warring elements in the society is thus reflected in the individual psychology of characters, their relationships with each other and their choices, as private and public crises arise.

Krishna Rao's language is reflective of a transitional phase in the evolution of modern Telugu literature — a switching over from the *grandhik* (classical) to the *vyavaharik* (colloquial) idiom. Although the author shows a preference for colloquial style, he often lets in a classical turn of phrase, expression or idiom. His style is devoid of poetry and resonance; his optimum effect is achieved in the direction of starkness which eminently suits the requirements of a satiric tale that ruthlessly exposes social maladies.

This novel may be best read as a social allegory fictionalizing the collapse of the moral order (*dharma*). The legend of the *Mahabharatha* is invoked occasionally as the paradigm for the conflict between good and evil. Ironically good does not triumph like in mythical times. It is evil that wins; but whether the victory is real or imagined, only readers can tell! Again, scriptures and mythologies say that the Divine intervenes whenever the order is threatened; but here Vasudeva Sastri the defender of *dharma* abandons the village as it perches precariously on the verge of a collapse. Lacking redemptive mythology and protagonist, the novel inexorably moves towards foredoomed closures. Volition is reduced to knee-jerk reflex and man merely flexes muscles when strings are pulled. Krishna Rao gives us a foreboding world of robotic action though *Kee-lubommalu* a novel that is sometimes Orwellian in its cynicism.

TRANSLATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....

Help was extended to me ungrudgingly by many and I wish to express my gratitude to them here: Dr. Ramamohana Rai responded to my queries throughout; Prof. Kethu Viswanatha Reddy interpreted some passages for me. In the actual writing, the advice and suggestions of Ms. Mini Krishnan, Project Editor, were of great benefit: what could only have been turgid and bland acquired clarity and life. Likewise, Dr. Ranga Rao, Editor, with meticulous care, effected improvements by a few deft strokes. I am grateful to all of them.

Sri T. Srinivasa Reddy, Sri Chandra Sekhar, Sri Mallikarjuna and Sri Shamiulla helped in the preparation of the manuscript. My thanks to them. My wife Vijayalakshmi and my children D.V. Suresh, Lavanya and D.V. Ravindra compared, by turns, the translation with the original. My younger two sons, Satish and Kalyan, assisted in ways too numerous to mention.

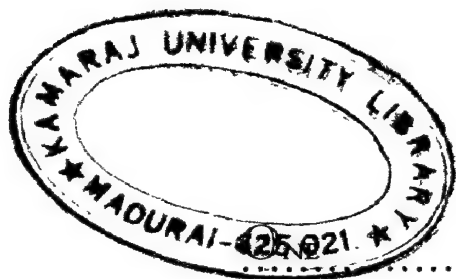
D. KESAVA RAO

INVOCATION

When hatred breaks its tether

*And pounces viciously,
When self-interest lashes its tail
And leaps with a roar,
When poverty moans
With a heart-rending cry,
Who will toil
In the field of action?*

*Virtue, generosity,
Friendship, refinement,
Dazzling ideas and streams of thought
— All fade away.
A curse looms.
O heart
Weep not for the motherland.*



Dusk had not yet spread its dark tresses.

Pullayya impatiently urged the bullocks on. They darted ahead, though the cart was heavily loaded. The road was full of pot-holes, thanks to the Panchayat Board¹. Nor was the condition of the cart up to much. There was paddy in the cart — seven salakalu² in all. If the cart overturned, or its axle broke....he would have to keep an all-night vigil right there on the road. Pullayya could bear any trouble, except the suffering of his bullocks. "Oh, Oh," he cried soothingly, straining at the reins, and the bullocks, checking their speed, trotted along.

The sky above was a spotless blue. The road beneath was red. Heads down, the white bullocks pulled the cart along the road. There were belled, ornamental, black collars round their necks. Black hair twisted into a thick cord, had been tied round their feet, just above their heels³. Their silky tasselled tails reached their hooves. Wheat-coloured bags lay piled in the cart, and, seated in the driver's seat, was this well-fed figure, his much washed turban a faded red. A cool breeze blew. The chirping of birds mingled with the soft chimes of the bells round the bullocks' necks and an occasional creaking of the cart.

Pullayya fell into a train of thought. Should one get angry with dumb animals? Why should one get angry at all? Without his knowledge, the managing committee of the school had met and decided to dismiss an innocent teacher. His fault? Only that he had not agreed to privately coach the son of a committee member. Was there any justice in removing him? The teacher had come to Pullayya and sobbed his heart out. Not that he would not get another job. But if he left his village, how would he maintain his family on his paltry salary?

Narrating his difficulties, he sought Pullayya's help. Pullayya said cautiously that he would look into the matter, for he was sure that there would be many obstacles in his path. Without informing him, the committee had resolved to ease the teacher out of his job. How unjust! They had done this in his absence. If they could do this, what else wouldn't they do?

Pullayya was not easily perturbed, but this time there was a more pressing reason for his anxiety. When Chandrasekharam had borrowed five thousand rupees from a Marwadi⁴, he, Pullayya, had stood surety. If he had not done so, the Marwadi would not have lent the money. Generally, Pullayya was very circumspect in matters of money. But two years ago, in an expansive mood, he had agreed to be Chandrasekharam's guarantor.

Those events were still fresh in his memory. He and Chandrasekharam had gone to town on some business and eaten in a hotel that night. Then Chandrasekharam had dragged a reluctant Pullayya to a play, bearing the expenses of that day. The next day he had sought Pullayya's help.

At that time, Chandrasekharam was very prosperous. He was running a paper-mill at enormous expense. Such a person had begged him to stand surety with the Marwadi for five thousand rupees. Pullayya could not refuse. His wife, Lakshamma, had cautioned him repeatedly from the beginning. But he stood surety for Chandrasekharam without her knowledge. Then came the news that Chandrasekharam had gone bankrupt. Doubtless, the Marwadi would mercilessly extort the five thousand from Pullayya.

What Pullayya was worried about was not the loss of five thousand rupees. He could bear ten such losses. But if Lakshamma came to know of it, he would be in trouble. He was ready to face the seven worlds, but Lakshamma's frown had the power to make him tremble. She was usually silent. She did not covet other people's money. But she wouldn't part with even a worthless blade of grass that belonged to her. If today Pullayya was in a position to circulate fifty thousand rupees, she was partly responsible for it. As his bride, she had brought a dowry of five thousand rupees, thirty years ago. The

amount grew to fourteen thousand with the compounding of interest on the money lent out. The rest of the money accrued through her frugality and the profits earned in the turmeric business. Pullayya too added ten more acres of land to the five his father had left him. Moreover, the village was now growing in size. Pullayya's three acres of wetlands adjacent to the village were in demand. They were excellent sites for houses. Those lands would fetch a minimum of twenty thousand. In these circumstances, Pullayya didn't need to worry about the loss of a mere five thousand.

But Lakshmamamma would be furious. She would blame her fate. If he cared so much for others, why didn't he become a sanyasi⁵? Why had he married her?— she would ask. Would he fill their children's mouth with dust? And she would burst into sobs.

That was not all. Husband and wife wouldn't speak to each other for nearly a month. Instead of "cloud-messages⁶," there would be wall-messages. Pullayya remembered all this and shook in fear.

There was another more painful aspect. It was well known that Pullayya was not gullible. The villagers respected this canny man who could milk even a stone. If it were known that he had been cheated by Chandrasekharam, what would it do to his reputation in the village? Those who amassed money were the most highly respected people. That was what vexed Pullayya.

How was he to explain things to Lakshmamamma? How could he retrieve his reputation in the village? These problems tormented him. The whole village was agog with the news of Chandrasekharam's bankruptcy. "Is it true that Chandrasekharam forged your signature on the Marwadi's promissory note?" some people had already asked him. What should he say in reply? Was a single loss complete failure? Pullayya was both angry and amused.

Just then the bullock on the left dipped its neck sharply. Pullayya came to himself and stared at it. The reins had slipped from the driver's seat and were entwined about the bullock's hoof. Quickly he dismounted, untangled the rope,

and jumped up onto the driver's seat again.

When the cart reached his backyard, the cattle got to their feet and mooed in delight at his approach. Pullayya felt very happy. They were dumb yet how grateful they were!

He gave the cart over to servants and stretched out on the cot at the front door. He lay in the cool breeze, forgetting everything.

His grandson, Jaggarao, came up from behind him and hugged him with a cry of delight. "Baav!" he shouted impishly.

"Oh little thief, is that you?"

"Yes, tatayya⁷, it's me, me."

"Come here, there's a nice boy."

"No I won't. I won't come ath all," he lisped.

"Why?"

"Amma⁸, there's thieves."

"Where?"

"In those your moustaches."

"Who told you so?"

"Amma⁹"

"Cha¹⁰!"

Rangamma, busy in the adjacent kitchen, heard this and called out to him. Without heeding her call, he went on: "Yes, tatayya! I asked nayanamma¹¹ too."

"What did she say?"

"She said that they hides in the mouth in the day. In the evening, they hides in the moustache. If we touches them, they cuts our throat, it seems."

"Then ask your nayanamma how many times they cut her throat."

"Oh yes, I'll ask her," he said and called out, "Nayanamma!"

Lakshnamma, who was supervising the arrangement of Pullayya's heated bath water, asked what the matter was.

"You a grown up and all you tells is lies," continued the toddler.

Standing with her left hand at her waist, and the right under her chin, Lakshnamma stared at him with amused surprise.

"How many times the thieves in tatayya's moustache cuts your throat?"

"You thunderbolt!" she shot at him in mock-anger and went in, smiling to herself.

Seetha called out to her father to go and have a bath. "It's getting late," she told him. She took Jaggarao in her arms as he was in a peevish mood, and gave him to Rangamma, her sister-in-law, who pacified the child, laid him in his cot in the hall and patted him to sleep.

Having bathed, when Pullayya came in to eat, Seetha sat by her father. Lakshmamma began serving them both. "Our vacation is coming to a close. I must leave for college soon," Seetha said.

She was at the women's college in town and had come to spend her vacation in the village. To Pullayya, Seetha and his younger son Ramarao were as precious as his eyes. He could not live without them. For some reason, Ramarao had not visited his home for the past year and a half. Pullayya had written to him several times to come home just once, but there had been no reply. To bring him round, he had stopped sending Ramarao money. Earlier he used to write at least once a month to ask after his parents and the child, Jaggarao. Pullayya could not understand his son. Perhaps he was incapable of doing so.

Pullayya remembered his son now, when Seetha talked about returning to her college. He knew that Seetha did not know anything about Ramarao; she had made it clear to them in the past twenty days, but overcome by fatherly affection, he asked again, "Seetha, don't you ever see your brother?"

"No nanna¹²," she said. "Now and then he visits me briefly but is silent most of the time."

"What do you think he's doing there?"

"Who knows? He never tells me."

"I haven't been sending money to him. How do you think he is managing? Or have you been giving him money?"

"Me?" Seetha looked at her father with a quizzical smile.

"Why do you stare at me? Isn't he your brother?"

Lakshmamma, serving buttermilk, interposed, "What huge

sums of money have you been sending her?"

"Ammi¹³," he said. "Don't be angry, I said that just for fun."

There was silence for a while. Pullayya continued, "Living in a town is not easy. One needs money all the time. How's he managing? Is he working somewhere for a living?"

"I don't think so," Seetha said. "He publishes articles in the papers now and then. I don't know if they pay him anything."

Pullayya became thoughtful. Lakshmamma asked, "Did you ever go to his room?"

"Oh, yes, I did," Seetha said sourly, "my brother is staying in that palace your brother has built."

Lakshmamma's face contorted with anger. "My brother isn't a wandering crow like yours. He has enough to satisfy his needs." Studying her expression, both father and daughter burst into laughter. Seetha was afraid that her mother would really be offended. She said in an appeasing tone, "It's not that, Amma. I pleaded with him for about a year and a half. Only once could I go to his room. There wasn't even space to shift his cot. And so poorly ventilated!"

"Anything else?" Pullayya asked.

"Let me see. Mosquitoes, cigarette butts, books in disorder, it was sickening. Brother was amused and sent me back by bus."

"Having gone there, you could have swept the room clean."

"You are right, Amma," Seetha said. "I should have taken a broom with me. It's not too late even now. Anyway, I am leaving for town. Send one by parcel after me."

Lakshmamma was angry. "I have seen so many years; neither my atta¹⁴ nor my aadabidda¹⁵ ever spoke to me like this. I have to suffer all these words now from my own daughter. Both of you are making fun of me, I know, because I have not learnt the alphabet."

Both of them finished their meal in silence.

Seetha was very fond of both her father and mother. She thought the world of them. She looked upon her father as an incarnation of dharma¹⁶, as mercy personified, and thought that no one in the village was as intelligent as he. She had

heard that Chandrasekharam had cheated her father of five thousand rupees. Was he stupid enough to be cheated? Mother knew nothing of it, otherwise she would have made a scene. Father would have bellowed at her. That would not have suited Seetha. First, she wanted to make sure from father what the truth was. But it had not been possible to have a word with him alone.

Seetha lay down, her mind buzzing with thoughts. Pullayya meanwhile was in the backyard, instructing the servants about feeding the cattle. Then Seetha heard him returning and lying down on the cot in his room. Mother and sister-in-law were busy in the kitchen. This seemed like the right moment to Seetha. Softly, she entered the room and sat by her father's pillow.

Pullayya's eyes were closed, but he knew that Seetha was in the room. "What is it child?" he asked.

Seetha didn't say anything. He thought that she had come there to ask for money, without her mother's knowledge, and decided to allow her to do the talking.

"Perhaps you are sleepy. I will go back to my room," she said. 7

"What strategy," he mused. "She wants me to ask her what the matter is. We cannot pit our wits against the young." If he did not ask her, he thought, she might go away without telling him anything. Unable to contain his curiosity, he asked her why she had come to him.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said hastily. "But is it true that you have stood surety for Chandrasekharam?"

"Who told you so?" he asked rather casually.

"Well..... everyone," she said.

Pullayya was already feeling drowsy. "People ... always talk, you know...." he said.

Hearing this, Seetha felt as if a red hot oven had been taken off her chest. Her heart throbbed in ecstasy. She knew father would never make any rash promises; if by any chance he had, he kept them, whatever the consequence. How many people in the world would do so? Most were hypocrites: amritham¹⁷ on the lips and poison in the heart. Father was

the twin-brother to truth; no, he was the elder brother to that virtue.

She thought of Chandrasekharam's handsome face. Good looks and good acts were poles apart. Perhaps virtue and good looks don't combine, just as Lakshmi and Saraswathi¹⁸ do not go together. How strange! But what would happen to him now? The Marwadi wouldn't sit by and watch his five thousand go down the drain; and her father would take him to court for forgery. Chandrasekharam was sure to be convicted. Of course, he deserved it. How would society last if everyone was a cheat? How would the world exist? Without order and virtue, wouldn't life become unbearable? Where did this wickedness spring from? Was it an inseparable part of human nature? If it was, then there was nothing like virtue at all; if it wasn't, how did it come into the world?

She could think no further. How could she answer questions that perplexed even philosophers?

Then she remembered Chandrasekharam's wife, Lalitha. They already had three children and, in three or four months, she would have another baby. If Chandrasekharam were found guilty, what would happen to Lalitha and the children? They would be on the streets. What a fate for those who now lived so well! She couldn't bear thinking about them any more.

Her thoughts turned to her father once more. It was such a relief to know that he had not stood guarantee, that he had not slid into the mire of dishonesty. It was a good day for her. She felt happy. She wanted to share this news with someone, but at this hour of night, who could she talk to? Her vadina¹⁹ was sleeping, Jaggadu²⁰ was muttering in sleep. There was no one in the backyard. She lay on her cot but tossed sleeplessly for many hours.

Pullayya woke up while it was still dark, allotted duties to the farm labourers and untethered the calves so that they might feed. After a wash, he was about leave the house when Lakshmmamma called, "I asked you to tell Achari to come to our house. Did you tell him?"

When the newly harvested grain was brought home, it was

the custom to prepare appalu as an offering to Anjaneyaswamy²¹. She had asked her husband the previous day to tell Achari to come by to prepare the sweet. Pullayya had, of course, met him, remembered Lakshamma's message but had not passed it on. He had been rather flustered by the blows he had received. He gave no answer and she scowled at him, turning back abruptly to go in. It took him some time to collect himself before he went into the backyard, wiping his face.

Ramayya and Kusalayya were tying hay into bundles in the backyard to be stored in the granary. They were discussing the ripeness of the crop in each field. They had an acre of land each but no bullocks of their own for the cultivation of their lands. So they helped Pullayya with his farm work in return for which they could use his bullocks.

Seeing Pullayya in the yard, they said, "People say you have not stood guarantee to Chandrasekharam." Pullayya did not respond, remembering the incident at home. They construed his silence as assent.

"So it means he can't escape the food and water in jail served in clay pots," they laughed. 9

"Who told you all this?" Pullayya asked.

"Your daughter. Basavachari was also here when she was talking to us," they said.

"Has Basavachari been here?"

They nodded.

"One moment," Pullayya said and hurried to the bazaar. Basavachari was so talkative that even a gingelly seed wouldn't moisten in his mouth. If it were left unchecked, the whole village would know that he had not stood surety. That would amount to breaking his word — a shameful thing. Bowed by shame, how would he raise his head?

How did this mistake occur? What had he told Seetha last night? Perhaps she had misunderstood him. All this confusion was because of her misapprehension. He must put a stop to it.

He could see Basavachari in the distance at the corner of the street. Ignoring his age, he ran towards him for some

distance, shouting, afraid that he would slip away. But Basavachari got into a jutka²² and Pullayya couldn't catch up with it. He lost his temper. Somehow, he forgot the matter on hand and shouted, "You took money from me to repair my cart. You have been putting it off for quite some time. I'll finish you for this, or don't call me Pullayya."

Basavachari, riding in the carriage, heard only the last words. Pullayya's anger baffled him and he was unable to understand why he was so annoyed. The lashed horse lunged forward.

Pullayya stood transfixed in the street, his face red with anger.

TWO

NOON.

10

It was the threshing season. There were no men at home. The little ones were at school. There was no bustle of life either in the library, at the rachchabanda¹ or in the streets. Domestic chores done, the women lay resting on mats. From the trees came the cawing of crows now and then, and occasionally there was the rattle of carts carrying loads of grain.

Satyanarayana Pantulu², after lunch, sat at his low desk in Pullayya's terraced room tallying accounts. A voice from indoors called him "Pantulu!" startling him, and with good reason. After he had taken his father's place as Pullayya's accountant, Lakshmamma had never called him. Nor had she ever engaged him in any work. So now her summons surprised him. "Coming, madam," he blurted out and before he could put the books in order and get up, she appeared at the door.

"Pantulu!"

"What is it, madam?" he asked.

"Is it true that the shavukaru³ stood guarantor to Chandrasekharam for ten thousand?" she had to find out the truth.

Satyanarayana Pantulu guessed that something had gone

wrong. If he responded without finding out what the matter really was, he would be in trouble. He needed time to think.

"Who said that, madam?"

"You can cover the mouth of a pot with a lid, but how can you seal that of the world?"

Satyanarayana Pantulu was silent. She went on. "What's there to hide? Your master himself said this to Seetha."

"If he has said so, why ask me?" Pantulu smiled sheepishly.

"Master and clerk, you make a good pair, don't you?"

Satyanarayana Pantulu was offended, but controlled himself. Lakshmamma could not restrain herself and spoke out, "Pantulu, I want the truth. Your father was such a nice man, a bulwark in our times of trouble. This is no flattery. You are heir to your father's qualities as well as his job. You have been looking after our household accounts for seven years. There can't be any secrets from you. You are like my own child, at least tell me the truth now. Pantulu, I hear your master was not a guarantor to Chandrasekharam garu⁴: the documents given to the Marwadi were forged. Your master himself said so to our daughter today. Amma⁵! How dare he! He has the audacity to wrong my children! He has children of his own, how could he do such an injustice to us! Everyone wants to crush the meek one, he who never says anything bitter. Why did your master accept this injustice tamely? Why didn't you advise him to consult a lawyer to send him a notice?"

Satyanarayana Pantulu choked. He did not know what to say in reply. He could not fathom Pullayya garu's intentions. He did not want to hastily say anything that would possibly get him into trouble. Better to be sure of his master's intentions first. His silence confirmed Lakshmamma's opinion that she had presumed correctly. In her mind's eye, Ramarao and Seetha paraded as destitutes without food and clothing. She shuddered at the thought.

Immediately, she sent for a carriage, and asked Satyanarayana Pantulu to follow her. He inquired where she was going and she said, "To my brother's son." He saw everything as through a mirror, and did not want to get entangled.

He excused himself saying that he had work to do. The

carriage moved away. Satyanarayana Pantulu was astounded by this incident. For the first time after his father had him appointed as clerk in this household, something unheard of was happening.

Pullayya almost worshiped Satyanarayana Pantulu. And he, for his part, didn't demand anything of Pullayya; even if he did, Pullayya would deny him nothing. Every year Pullayya sent him two putlu⁶ of grain in return for his services: keeping accounts of his turmeric and money-lending businesses. In a profitable year he would also give him an anna's⁷ share. Lakshmamma also looked after his needs. Besides curd and buttermilk, she also sent some of the vegetables they grew to his home. The shavukaru trusted him in all things. In all dealings involving thousands of rupees, his services were employed. There was nothing he didn't know about the finances of that household.

What about the guarantee to Chandrasekharam garu? Satyanarayana Pantulu tried to remember, but at first couldn't recollect anything. Then slowly his mind filled with memories...

12

Two years ago, it had been raining heavily. He had been sitting in his usual place, posting entries in the account books. Reclining against the wall, Pullayya had said, "Pantulu, I made a mistake yesterday." He had asked him what it was. He said that he had stood guarantor for five thousand to the Marwadi on behalf of Chandrasekharam. He felt that standing guarantor to anyone was wrong. "Anyway, it's all over," he had said. "No use wailing over it now," he sighed.

"In that case, shall I make an entry?" Satyanarayana Pantulu had asked.

"We don't know what's going to happen. Put it down in the suspense account," he had said. Those books were in the cabinet: he had made entries in his own hand.

What was all this, then? Satyanarayana Pantulu was puzzled. Pullayya would not tell a lie, even if his life was in danger. Had he been a liar, he would have been a richer man. What, then, was this perplexing business? Had there been any harsh exchange of words, causing some enmity? It didn't seem

likely. Was he intent on taking revenge? Even that appeared implausible. There must be some mistake. Pullayya himself would set it right. He, Satyanarayana, had nothing to do with the business. Perhaps Pullayya had forgotten; was it not his duty to remind him? Pullayya might take offence, and that was a risk; he had a large family to support. Till now, he had conducted himself well. It was good he hadn't followed Lakshamma. Pullayya might suspect that he had incited her. But why had she gone to her brother's son? Oh, yes, Seshagiri was an advocate. She would probably have a notice served to Chandrasekharam garu. In that case, things would become worse. If only he had stopped her! But would she have heeded his entreaty? She would not have trusted him, would even have begun to dislike him.

Satyanarayana Pantulu's conscience troubled him: he had been a silent witness to some distasteful happenings. Unable to carry on with his work, he went home.

Seetha served Pullayya his meal that night. He knew that his wife had visited Seshagiri and he was furious. He didn't like it — the way she assumed authority. He rushed into the room and roared, "Aay!"

Seetha and Rangamma sensed that something dreadful was going to happen. Neither of them dared to talk with him. They shuddered in fear.

Pullayya frowned at his wife with angry, burning eyes. She did not flinch a bit.

"Where did you go?" he bawled out.

"To Seshagiri."

"Why? I am still alive, am I not?"

"So it would seem."

He raised his hand to strike her on the cheek, but restrained himself and shook with rage.

"What wrong have I done?" she shrieked in fury. "Because you are gentle, they are forging promissory notes to take the food out of your children's mouths. I am only trying to stop them. What's improper in that? I asked Seshagiri to issue a notice to him. What right have you to throw away the children's money? I have as much right as you in this matter."

After this, what was the use of beating her? He stamped out of the house.

He himself was responsible for this mess. Had he clearly explained things to Seetha, she would not have carried the lie to Ramayya and Kusalayya. Basavachari would not have spread it in the village; his wife would not have done what she had done: gone to a lawyer. Beating her would only invite opposition from the womenfolk of the village. When the notice was served, the news would shock the whole village. What would happen to his reputation? He could go to Seshagiri and prevent the notice from being issued: he might not have drafted it yet. He had known Seshagiri since his birth: should he explain and apologise to him? How incongruous it would seem!

Suppose the notice had already been sent. To now say that it was all misinformation would make his wife look ridiculous in the village. If people laughed at him or his wife — was there any difference?

14 Perhaps it was wise to go to Chandrasekharam and explain the mistake. That wouldn't do, either. Having helped him in his need, should he now kneel before him? It had been a mistake to have stood guarantor in the first instance. Because of this mistake, his elder son had died.

But how were his son's death and his helping Chandrasekharan related? Was there no way of coming out of this sticky business? "Perhaps a way can be found," thought Pulayya and with that felt some relief.

THREE

.....

Moonlight, bright like flour spread on the ground, shone all over the place. A sharp wind was blowing. Crickets chirped. On either side of the road, jute fields gleamed like scattered emeralds. Fire-flies glowed like rays of hope for the dejected. From the enclosed threshing-floors came the occasional shouts of children at play.

"Who's there?" Kusalayya raising his head from the hay covering a heap of grain shouted to the man walking on the road.

"It's me, Chandrasekharam."

"Is that you, sir? Why are you on foot?"

"I set off from the town in the evening. There were no carriages."

Chandrasekharam flinched. He thought he had made a mistake in not saying that he had got off the carriage and that he was walking to enjoy the cool breeze. In the past, he would not have regretted the reply he made; he would not have cared what others thought. He would have followed what his heart dictated.

But why should there be any change in him now? Was he in any way a different person? There had, of course, been a change in his status. What kind of change was it? Involuntarily, he recalled his own life.

Chandrasekharam's parents had been well off: they had had enough and more to spare. His father had been a lover of knowledge and so had educated his son well. Indeed, Chandrasekharam was studious, had no bad habits and had soon registered in a college. Those were the days when the thunderous orations of politicians rolled from the Himalayas down to the Bridge¹. They had urged the people to resist the study of an alien tongue and had spurred them on to action saying that the future prosperity of India lay on the shoulders of her students.

Many ideas had sprouted in the political field those days and Chandrasekharam had been attracted to one of them. Man himself was responsible for his joys and sorrows. Human welfare depended on an equitable distribution of wealth which followed certain principles; their misapplication led to binaries such as the rich and the poor, resulting in the suffering of countless people. So dharma was getting eroded and life was becoming unbearable; the sciences and the fine arts had disappeared, and poverty, misery and ignorance were performing a satanic dance. Once the principles of a fair distribution of wealth were applied, society would sparkle. The

country would abound in milk and grain — the things it needed. No one would be either hungry or overfed. There would be joy all around—the first step to real progress.

Young Chandrasekharam was taken in by this argument. During his student days, he had been jailed once but later he had graduated and married Lalitha, the daughter of Ramiredy. The marriage made him richer by a few thousand rupees.

Chandrasekharam's life would have gone on without any vicissitudes, if he had, like others, looked after his lands carefully. But he had felt a sort of dissatisfaction with such an existence. Without industries the country would not develop. They were the mainstay of the landless labourers. Their means of livelihood would increase with the growth of industry and social conditions would, as a result, change. Democracy would thrive, knowledge would flourish, superstitions die out. With everyone well-informed, there would be happiness all around. The dirt of the ages would be washed away.

16 Driven by such ideas Chandrasekharam decided to start a paper-mill. He was young and full of enthusiasm; he had heaps of goodwill and enough property. He converted these into capital; he borrowed from friends and relatives and established a paper-mill, which very soon started blowing its siren three times a day, as if asking, "How much paper do you want?" Huts sprang up around it in no time.

Those were happy days for Chandrasekharam. He was brimming with enthusiasm but lacked the experience, skills and financial strength to run the mill. Nor did he receive the required cooperation. He decided on a six-hour factory shift. His workers were better paid than the others in the area. Even medical benefits were provided. But the workers demanded more facilities and used their unions to propagate the idea that Chandrasekharam was exploiting them. Their dissatisfaction resulted in a decline in production and increase in cost.

One day he called all the workers for a talk. "This factory is yours," he told them frankly. "These are the figures of income, and this is the expenditure. We are facing losses. What should we do? Unless the factory is expanded, we cannot

absorb the losses. For that we need capital. If you don't believe what I say, elect five or six representatives. Let them check the accounts. What do you say? If all of us have to live, the factory must live. I see only one way out of this mess: running the factory on a co-operative basis."

The workers did not say anything in reply. Patiently, he explained the position to them once again. Finally they responded. They said they had nothing to do with profit or loss, production or capital. They only wanted an increase in their wages and an extension of facilities. Since man hankers for comfort, their demands were not surprising.

Chandrasekharam was caught in a knotty situation. Should he or should he not run the factory? Either way it was risky. Having invested so much, he could not now close it down: that way lay bankruptcy. Even if he was prepared for that, what would people say? How would he hold his head up in society? Besides, hundreds of workers depended on the factory for their livelihood. Should he abandon them midstream? The very thought disgusted him.

Some poor people had trustfully deposited moneys with him which he had spent on the factory. Those amounts being insufficient, he mortgaged the mill piecemeal to the Marwadis and gained more time.

As the factory continued to function, the mentality of the workers also underwent a change. If he was incurring losses wouldn't he close it down? Is he running it only to help us? Are capitalists so concerned with workers? Perhaps like the tiger's sympathy for the goat². All that he had told them the other day was a lie: otherwise, how would the factory function for so long? In this way, even his sympathy for them became suspect.

By the time Chandrasekharam woke up from his stupor, the factory had closed. Hundreds of workers lost their means of livelihood. The farmers' families in the villages around were sunk in gloom. Chandrasekharam's property as well as that of his wife and father-in-law evaporated like camphor. Darkness encircled him. Thoughts about his condition reduced him to fright and tears. He wanted to spread joy and

had toiled incessantly for it, but what had happened in the end? The poor now stood bankrupt, losing money they had earned with their sweat and blood. All because of him. He had made hundreds of workers lose their livelihood. There was no greater betrayer of the working class than he. How was he better than any capitalist?

This morbid guilt prevented Chandrasekharam from being seen in the village in daylight. Fearing his creditors, he visited his home only at night and went back to town early in the morning. What a life for a man who had once lived like a prince! In the past he would have blamed himself for his sorry plight: now he was more cautious. He wondered whether there was such a thing as fate.

As soon as he came near the village pond, Bheemeswaram greeted him. Chandrasekharam took out a bottle from the inner pocket of his coat and handed it over to him and turned to go home. But Bheemeswaram gripped his hand and invited him to accompany him.

"There's no one to help at home. I have to hurry."

"Sankaram is waiting for you in my house."

"Tomorrow, perhaps..." Chandrasekharam said.

"No," he said, "he has an important matter to discuss with you today."

On Bheemeswaram's insistence, Chandrasekharam followed him to his home. Sankaram welcomed him with a smile and led him to an old chair. Bheemeswaram opened the bottle of whisky and filled two glasses. Sankaram took a glass and said, "Sekharam garu, I didn't know you were so stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it better to print counterfeit currency notes than to forge promissory notes?"

"A forged document? Who has committed forgery?" Chandrasekharam asked in amazement.

"I hear you made Pullayya the guarantor in a forged document and gave it to Lalchand."

"You don't mean that, do you?"

"That's what the people in the village are saying," Bheemeswaram said.

"Very soon you'll receive a notice from the lawyer for forgery," Sankaram explained.

"All right. I suppose the truth will emerge then," Chandrasekharam said. They could see no trace of fear in his face. "It is rather difficult to go to prison at this age," Chandrasekharam added.

"If Pullayya was really your co-obligant, what is he doing all this for?" Both of them asked at the same time.

"That's what puzzles me."

In the silence that followed, Chandrasekharam rose to leave. He could not understand Pullayya's intentions. Why was he harbouring such wicked motives? If Pullayya was taking legal action, as Sankaram had said, he might well have to go to prison. That would be a good lesson for him.

Had Lalitha heard the news? Even if she hadn't, someone would sooner or later inform her. Her father from whom he had borrowed, was now, thanks to him, reduced to beggary. And yet she bore no grudge. His bungling did not annoy her. Now would she presume that he was capable of such roguery? When the whole world was crowing about it, why wouldn't she believe it? She might not believe it. However, she might at least suspect him of not being open. Loss of money might mean nothing to her, but if she suspected that he had violated the law, how would she feel? Had he married her only to cast her into this hell? It was horrible — this situation — for her, a woman heavily pregnant and with nobody to help her.

Somehow, Chandrasekharam reassured himself. All that had happened in the past might be attributed to his mismanagement and inefficiency! But this new misfortune was not of his doing: his conscience was clear. He used to feel embarrassed in her presence. This time he was untainted. He could prove his innocence to her and also the ruthlessness of the world. He felt a new strength with this thought. The balance, tipped to his disadvantage, straightened. He sighed deeply. His face shone with a strange elation.

CHandrasekharam's ancestral house was a large structure, with open ground all around it. It had a tiled porch on one side, adjacent to which was a stack-yard for hayricks. There was a well in the open space in front of the house, and another in the backyard. On one side stood a couple of palm trees staring at the sky.

Lalitha was sitting alone, apprehensively, on a pyol¹ in the room on the east side, glancing at a four-day-old newspaper. Even a small sound startled her. She was about twenty-five and rather thin. Her hair was combed back neatly and tied into a knot at the nape of her neck. She was fair-skinned and her lips were rosy with health. There was a small black mole above her upper lip. Pregnancy had really enhanced her looks.

At the sound of footsteps, she went to the door. Chandrasekharam was shuffling off his sandals as he usually did beside the door, when she asked, "Is this true?"

Without asking her what it was, he understood that she was speaking about the forgery.

"Do you believe it too?" he asked.

She felt greatly relieved on hearing his reply. She took the uttareeyam² from him. He took off his coat, careful not to spoil its creases, hung it on a peg on the wall and sat down on the pyol. She sat by his side, in that silence, leaning against him and smoothing out his shirt collar. The lamp burned on, unflickering. The only sound was the soft breathing of their sleeping children.

"Why has Pullayya done something so improper?" Lalitha said as if questioning herself.

"That's what puzzles me too. But the truth will come out. There may be some mistake somewhere, or..."

"What do you think has happened?"

"We can't say anything for certain. Especially about Pullayya: he is so unpredictable. It's a question of five thousand rupees. Naturally, he might be perturbed about it."

"So you've borrowed five thousand there too."

Her heart would break if he told her about all the amounts he had borrowed: both of them would lie sleepless that night, worrying about their debts. The mind tries to forget sorrow and misfortune. Chandrasekharam too tried to forget about them, and he was oblivious of what was happening.

"Pullayya seems to have forgotten that there are witnesses," he said casually.

While setting off that morning, Chandrasekharam had said that he would repay part of the money due to her father. Laltha recalled that remark but did not remind him about it. She was just happy that her husband was not guilty of any misdemeanour. She bowed to Tirupathi Venkanna³ in her heart for this compassion. Infamy had not touched her husband — that was enough for her.

"These trials and tribulations have been chasing us all along and will remain with us as long as they have to. So why wail over them?" she said. "Have a bath, perhaps even the water has gone cold."

She filled the vessel with hot water. Declining her help, he carried the heavy vessel out to have a bath. When he came back, he found only one serving of food. Usually they ate together. So he asked, "Have you eaten?"

"Please have your dinner. I'm not hungry."

"Do you want two to go hungry?"

"I'm not hungry, I told you."

"I know," he said. "You are not hungry, but what about the baby? I know it is hungry." When he spoke about the unborn baby, a smile brightened her face. He caressed and fondled her gently as he would a baby and made her eat.

Dinner over, he went into the room on the west side of the house. Two cots were laid in it, one alongside the other. The younger children lay sleeping on the big cot, and the elder daughter on the small one. On the big cot all the bedclothes were pushed to a side in a bundle. The sheet lay on

the floor. Flapping the sheet vigorously to rid it of dust, Chandrasekharam covered both the children with it. The elder girl lay smiling in her sleep. He lightly kissed her on the cheek and sat down in an easy-chair.

Because he had brought them into the world, these innocent creatures would have to suffer misery and poverty. What right had he to cast them into such a hell? Does man's knowledge and freedom serve to perform only such acts? His heart clouded over with sorrow.

Lalitha tidied the kitchen, came in, and sat on the elder one's cot.

"My father was here this morning. They are in a fix again. Shoudn't we repay at least a part of that money? My brother — you know, how well-dressed he always looked. Today he is in tatters. A prosperous family has come to such a pass by helping us," she wiped her tears with her paita-kongu⁴.

Unable to look at her, he turned his head aside. He saw an envelope on the table.

"What is this?" he asked.

"The notice from Pullayya's lawyer."

"So they've sent it, have they?"

"Otherwise how would I know about it?"

There was silence for some time which was broken by Lalitha.

"The saibu⁵ has called four or five times."

"Which one?"

"The tailor. His eyes were so frightening the young one shrieked. His wife and children are ill. He tells me that he too is unwell. They don't even have gruel for food. Saying that he wept, poor fellow! All that you owe him, he says, is only two hundred rupees. Please pay him first, somehow — even if you have to pledge your head for that."

Chandrasekharam couldn't speak. His heart grew heavy. He wanted some consolation, which he got only when he was assured that the fault was not his.

So he referred to Pullayya. "See what atrocities he is trying to commit. He's jealous of my popularity. Otherwise, why would he do this to me? Last year he stood for the position

of the school president and he thinks I am the cause of his defeat. He doesn't know how unpopular he is in the village, and so I am the target of his anger. There are other reasons, too. With the establishment of the paper-mill, wages have increased. He would prefer to ill-treat the workers but these days who would take it lying down? He is jealous of the business the paper-mill is doing and he wants to spoil it because then he would be free to play his games. His plan is to make the workers accept the wages he offers. In fact, all the big landholders around are burning with envy at the increase in wages," he said.

Lalitha was amazed. She had not known that there could possibly be such deep-rooted intrigues at work.

"Can there be so much jealousy? she wondered.

"Nothing is as plain as it appears," he said gravely.

"I was greatly mistaken. I've misunderstood you, thinking that your incompetence is responsible for all this." She slid her soft hand into his hair and gently ruffled it. He closed his eyes, thrilled by the delicate touch. But soon the visions of his father-in-law in torn clothes, the tailor and his bed-ridden wife and children, the helpless widow shedding tears manifested themselves before him. He saw the ruined huts of the workers. He shuddered.

He got up with a start. "Lalitha, lie down," he told her. "Don't close the door. I shall return from the bazaar in a moment." He went straight to Bheemeswaram's house.

Lalitha, unaware of what was happening, got up listlessly, spread her husband's bed and lay down to sleep. She couldn't sleep for a long while. Feeling uncomfortable, she tossed about.

Sometime in the night she saw her husband staggering towards his cot. She had never seen him in such a condition before. In that hush, she let out a plaintive cry.

Bharat¹ is a great country and it is our villagers who are responsible for that greatness. This culture is a mystery to city-bred, college-educated youngsters. What does the young crow know about the blow from a catapult? The villages preserve our ancient traditions and practices. In a village, everyone knows everything about everybody else: what this family had for dinner, which home did not light its kitchen fires, which woman quarrelled with her husband, which householder is struggling to bring up his children, how much money this or that shavukaru has lent for interest, and so on. When a poor householder comes to the rachchabanda or sits near the library, people give him free advice, "It's time you got your son married." Or, sometimes, they might ask, "What curry did you have for dinner yesterday?" knowing fully well that there had been nothing to eat in that house.

It was no wonder, then, that the whole village soon came to know about Chandrasekharam's forgery. The only snag was that he did not declare insolvency. Otherwise, they would have summoned him to the kutchery chavadi² and passed judgment on his conduct. Pullayya was like a tiger in the village: his tail was the length of two arms. Shorter perhaps by a finger's width. Who had the courage to approach him for information? Troubled by the great implications of this problem, the people of the village did not know what to do.

One day Potti Rammayya³ came to Pullayya as he stood overseeing the feeding of his young bulls. He knew that Pullayya was proud of his bulls. He said ingratiatingly, "Maama⁴, the bull on the right⁵ is a real hero. It has no equal in our district."

"Indeed? When did you learn this?"

"The other day, when we carried the paddy from the field

in the east, when the cart got stuck in the mud near the canal."

"Even the bull on the left," Pullayya said, handing him a dried tobacco leaf, "is in no way inferior."

"True. It has to be equal to the other." Rammayya continued. "By the way what is he up to? I hear he has falsified the document making you the guarantor. He hopes perhaps that it will be valid. Valid or not, will we let it end thus? Truly, this is Kali Yuga⁶. Times are different now. Telling a lie was death in the past, but it has become the easiest thing to do now and this is what most people are doing. It has become the staple food from the first moment of wakefulness to the last second before falling asleep."

"You are right, Rammayya," said Pullayya. "The world has changed a lot."

Rammayya rolled the leaf into a cheroot⁷, lit it and said, "While passing by, I peeped into the backyard and saw you and I thought I would have a word with you. I must go now, it's time to untie the calf for its feed."

Staring after the departing Potti Rammayya, Pullayya bit the end of his cheroot and spat it out. "You son of a bitch! Have you really come here to talk with me? I know Mallayya has sent you to find out about the forgery affair and my own opinion of it. Anyway you are lucky, you got an anna's worth of tobacco from me," he thought.

Besides Potti Rammayya, four or five others also spoke about the forgery and heaped abuses on Chandrasekharam. Pullayya neither agreed nor disagreed with them: he just smiled. He noticed how this affair was creating a flutter in the village. What he could not understand was the mind of the leader of the rival group, Mallayya. He did not know what Mallayya thought about it or whether he was aware of it at all.

Above all, Pullayya's conscience troubled him. He had never wanted to get into such a messy situation nor thought that he would ever do something so wrong. There was no enmity between him and Chandrasekharam. Their families had never, for the past three generations, been hostile to each other. Chandrasekharam had never obstructed him in any way

or harmed him in any manner. He had wanted to provide a livelihood for the poor and had burnt his own fingers in the bargain. He was not guilty of any iniquity. Sending a man like him to jail was horrible in itself. He too had children. Chandrasekharam's suffering would surely affect Pullayya... circumstances had forced Pullayya into this position. How was he to get out of this dreadful mess?

Pullayya lost his appetite with these cares and was losing sleep as well. His moustache suddenly began to grey.

Seetha, the first to notice this change, asked Lakshamma one day, "Amma, why is father behaving so strangely these days?"

"True. He has not been eating well. He used to eat three times a day, now he eats only twice. And that too, he merely chews a few morsels unwillingly. This forgery business has depressed him very much."

Seetha was on the verge of tears. Her father was the incarnation of dharma. Why should he be entangled in difficulties? Was there no place for dharma and justice in this world? 26 She had always revered her father and she was now deeply concerned about him. Every morning she placed a mug of water and a neem-stalk⁸ in readiness for him and stood by, holding a towel. If he had a headache, she herself applied the balm.

One day, on hearing that Chandrasekharam had said that her father was entirely at fault, she was astounded. How could he, a man with children, say such a callous thing? Was he made of stone? How was the world tolerating his nefarious designs without cutting him to pieces and pickling him in salt? But really this was a shameless world. It sat calmly, discarding everything decent. Suppose this oppressive feeling affected father and... indeed Chandrasekharam did not have any human kindness.

Seetha's holidays were over. Pullayya ordered a bullock cart to take her to the railway station. Seetha said, "Nanna, why all this trouble? For two rupees we can hire a horse-cart to the railway station." But Pullayya did not agree. "Horse-drawn carts are unbearable. You don't know them. They shake and roll about so much you'll be sore all over." He brought out

the black ornamental collars with bells for the bullocks, together with decorative ribbons for their waists.

Lakshmamma saw these embellishments and, smiling to herself, said, "As one grows old one becomes dandyish, perhaps." The worker spread a mattress in the cart and placed Seetha's box in it. Seetha bade her mother goodbye and got into the cart.

"Oray⁹, go and attend to your work," Pullayya ordered.

"The young bulls are still unbroken and the road will be full of traffic. Take one of the workers also along with you," Lakshmamma urged him.

"It would be better if you came instead. Get into the cart. If the bulls are frightened, you could hold them by the horns."

The worker laughed.

"Hai! Cho!" Pullayya urged the bullocks on.

Lakshmamma stood at the gate and shouted to Seetha, "Mind yourself, Seetha. Be careful."

As the cart moved forward, the village receded. The bells in the collars of the young bullocks tinkled. Yellow flowers bloomed in green fields on either side of the wood. A cool breeze blew in their faces. The cart raised red dust behind it. White clouds hovered above. Seetha observed all this with delight.

"Seetha!"

"What is it, nanna?"

"Why does Ramudu live in town? Can't he stay home like a lord and look after the fields?"

"He enjoys studying."

"Is there no pleasure in tilling the fields? Are we living like animals, without any sense of pleasure?"

"Tastes differ. Liking one thing doesn't mean that one considers the others worthless," Seetha said.

Pullayya was silent. At the station, Pullayya parked the cart. He stopped Seetha, who wanted to call a coolie¹⁰ to carry her box, and carried it himself. He bought tickets for them both and went to the platform. The train was about to arrive. His beloved daughter was leaving him, and he didn't know how to express his affection for her.

If she were ten years younger, he would have amused her in different ways: giving her a piggy-back ride, throwing her up in the air and catching her or making her laugh by tickling her. Now she was grown up, as tall as himself. How could he express his fondness for her? Their worlds were different. Dejected, he looked away.

Seetha bought a toy-whistle from a hawker and, opening her box, took out a silk handkerchief. Pullayya watched her all the while. Meanwhile, the train arrived. Pullayya searched for a ladies' carriage and asked Seetha to get in it after placing her box inside. Seetha gave the whistle and handkerchief to her father and said, "Give these to Jaggadu."

"This silk cloth for that imp, who always plays in the mud."

"He is very fond of this," said Seetha. "He was crying for it, but vadina snatched it from him and put it in my box again... all right, I think you had better go."

Pullayya didn't know what to say. The engine hooted. He took out a hundred rupees from his pocket hastily, and placing the notes in her palm, closed her fist. She did not know how much he had given her. "What is this money for? You have already given me some at home, haven't you?" She tried to return the money to him.

"Buy clothes with it," he said and, standing back, told her, "Don't stop writing letters."

As the train pulled out of the station, he stood there watching it till it disappeared.

As soon as he came home, Lakshmamma asked, "Have you replied to the Marwadi's letter?" Learning that he hadn't, she insisted on his writing a reply immediately. She gave it to Satyanarayana Pantulu to post it when he came there.

Pullayya closed his eyes, exhausted. He saw his bullock cart moving along, with Ramudu in the driver's seat. Out of sheer youthful recklessness, Ramudu whipped both the bullocks hard making them race forward. The cart was now moving in the air. Pullayya himself could not take the reins in his hand, as he was sitting at the back of the cart. He continued shouting, "Oray, Ramudu!" As a bus sped towards them, Ramudu lost his nerve. With a thunderous noise, the cart

crashed into the canal by the road. The head of the bull on the right split into two and it lay on the road, dying. The bull on the left, howling like a rail engine, fell at a distance, completely covered in blood. Pullayya did not know what had happened to Seetha and Ramudu. Trembling with fear, he climbed out of the cart. Chandrasekharam stopped the bus and got off, laughing derisively. "What else can the result of injustice be?" he asked. His reproach echoed in Pullayya's heart.

Pullayya woke with a start, soaked in perspiration. He called to his wife, washed his hands and feet and drank some water. Only then did he stop shivering.

He went directly to his fields. The workers were bundling hay. The work could have been over by evening, but it looked as though it would go on till the next afternoon. "What have you been doing since morning? Have you been snoring without a thought of this world?" he growled at them. These days he felt that even his own workers were somehow not showing him the respect that was his due. Then, as he went to the bullocks tied to the cart to push the straw towards them, the red bullock that was usually tame, tossed its horns in his direction. Perhaps even the beasts were angry with him. Naturally, when he did such reprehensible things! They sensed his guilt.

Pullayya suddenly descended to reality. All this was only an illusion caused by guilt. What did animals know about good and bad, justice and injustice, things which even the learned found difficult to distinguish?

Pullayya started to walk towards the village. At the tamarind tree, Sambayya greeted him affectionately. Further ahead, the people at the rachhabanda smiled at him and respectfully invited him to sit with them. He wondered whether the respect displayed was genuine. Perhaps the whole village was laughing behind his back. He was irritated by the thought. How could he know the truth? Would anyone tell the truth if questioned? Would he himself tell the truth in the witness box?

Inventing a pretext, Pullayya invited everyone in the

village to dinner. All those invited attended the dinner and went away satisfied. Seshagiri, who was also present, later sat alone with his uncle, talking about Chandrasekharam.

"Maama, the Marwadi came to me the other day."

"Indeed?"

"He showed me the promissory note. The signature in it was just like yours. I don't know whom Chandrasekharam caught hold of to do this job: it was a perfect job all right. I asked Sekharam later what this was all about and he told me that you yourself had signed on the document in the hotel room."

"It's a lie, a complete lie," Pullayya burst out. "I did not sign any paper in that hotel room." His tone was firm.

"Sekharam is also in trouble. He is now issuing registered replies to his creditors for the amounts he has already paid. It seems when the accounts were tallied, there were credit entries. And, yes, perhaps you know that one of the witnesses in this matter is dead."

30 For Pullayya this was a good opportunity. He had never signed on any paper in that hotel: no one could prove now that he had. So there was no doubt that he would definitely win the case.

Or would he?

Pullayya spent the night in the chair.

Six

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Ammayamma garu was well known not only in that village but in three neighbouring districts as well. She had suffered lathi blows four times and had been to prison six times. There was no collective effort which had not included her: the Harijan Movement¹, the Suthra Yagna², the Salt Satyagraha³, the boycott and burning of foreign clothes⁴, propagation of Hindi⁵ and so on. She was a pious Indian woman. If anyone was looking for the tremendous spirit of sacrifice of sacred

Indian womanhood, and selfless service to one's country combined with marvellous perspicuity, one did not need any example greater than this lady's history to date.

There was no problem, however knotty, which she could not solve. Politicians, economists, social reformers, scientists, doctors and lawyers were agonizing over vexing questions because they were unable to fully understand the meaning of fundamental principles. If these were understood, no problem would crop up. The first principle was that every un-Indian thing should be boycotted. Industrialisation, foreign education and European traditions were not helpful. If they were banned, with them would vanish unemployment, labour problems and outmoded social practices. The second principle was self-sufficiency. If each attended to his own duty, there would be no differences like the high and the low, thus paving the way to total democracy. The third principle was that society and the country were greater than the individual.

For the sake of the country and society, great sacrifices were necessary... these could bring glory to the nation and ameliorate the condition of the people. "A country isn't the soil, it is the people⁶."

For years, one must concede, Ammayamma garu had followed these prescriptions faithfully. She had also been collecting donations since her release from prison to start and run an ashram for Harijans⁷. If the ashram had been in a position to train a hundred boys and girls, it was entirely due to the efforts of Ammayamma garu and not because the Government had sanctioned any special grants. She personally visited neighbouring villages to collect donations and even the site on which the ashram stood was one such gift. But those who did not know her or appreciate her activities said different — and unbelievable — things about her.

If she had so wished, as a political victim, she could have got five acres of land from the Government. She did not even apply for it. Would such a person trade in the black-market? Would she sell the cement and iron, collected to build a hostel for Harijan students? Some questioned how much she was giving to the Government out of the twenty putlu of paddy

she received. Some raised queries about her sister's bank accounts. But these charges were entirely baseless. Else, how would the anniversary of the ashram be attended every year by some justice of the High Court or an important minister or some heavy-weight in national politics? The world was full of vile and jealous people. When would the world be rid of such people? Even noble acts were dubbed selfish, narrow-minded and unjust.

There was no end to the tales about her personal life. They said that she got her husband to massage her legs and feet, and that she did not pay the Maalas⁸ properly. Once, when a necklace was missing in her sister's house, she had the skin on the thighs of a servant — whom she suspected — pulled out with a goldsmith's pincers. When he did not talk, she had him beaten till he vomited blood. Unable to bear the blows, he said that he had given it to someone. Inquiries revealed that his confessions were false. Finally, the necklace was found at home.

32 Could all this gossip be true? A rose can't be said to be bad because it has thorns. Just because Ammayamma garu's character was slightly flawed, it was impossible to condemn every action of hers. No individual was without blemish: there would be at least a birthmark!

Ammayamma garu knew all about Chandrasekharam ... that he was ruined. She was confident that this was due to his un-Indian behaviour. Dharma always won, adharma never. Even in the matter of that forged signature, Chandrasekharam must have been guilty. He was greedy, not Pullayya, who had fifty thousand rupees and came of three generations of farming stock. A raithu⁹ would never lie, even if you cut his neck: he would stand for truth till his last breath. If Pullayya had done something adharmic, would he flourish? His success was positive proof that he was on the side of dharma. Hence Pullayya was not guilty.

The memory of Lalitha drove Ammayamma garu to the verge of tears. What a fate! A shattered family! A fourth child born and nobody to look after them! The children in rags and nobody to feed them on time, nobody to bathe and dress

them. Ashrams had to take care of such people. Lalitha would find things easier if the two elder children were taken off her hands and admitted in the ashram. It would also help the cause of untouchability, which was a deeply rooted malaise in society. Other farmers might then send their own children to the ashram. There would be unity and an end to caste hostilities, if children of all castes played, read and ate at the same place. The labourers of the village had a low opinion of the ashram, though she hadn't harmed them in any way. The enrolment of Chandrasekharam's children might deflect a part of their affection for him to her. After all, public opinion sustains the world.

Taking her khadder¹⁰ bag, Ammayamma garu rose and set out. Unfortunately, God had given her a corpulent body which made her look like a log of wood without any womanly curves. She rolled along like a podgy rock pestle. Lalitha had had a post-natal bath a month ago, but was still unwell. As she lay with the infant by her side, unable to get up, she asked Ammayamma garu, weakly, to sit in the old chair which creaked in protest.

The cots stood as they were. The beds lay unmade. Bed wraps — merely old sarees — lay strewn here and there. Books and papers were scattered on the table. The older girl sat in a corner playing achanagayalu¹¹, while the other two younger children ran about playing "train," hooting like a rail engine. Ammayamma garu tried to control a deep sense of unease.

Prudently, Ammayamma garu praised the one-time glory of Lalitha's parents and extolled Chandrasekharam's intelligence and education. She wept with Lalitha at their present suffering. "Not all days are dark: some have moonlight, and some gloom. Happiness and sorrow are the same¹²," she consoled Lalitha.

"Lalithamma, look here. I will take the two elder children to the ashram for these two months. In the meantime, your problem will be solved. You would also gain some strength." She revealed the purpose of her visit.

Sorrow and anger flooded Lalitha's heart. She sobbed

loudly, weakened as she was by her illness. Ammayamma garu felt nervous.

"We are poor, but our children are not a burden to us. Though we have no money, we have the respect of our caste. Should I send my children to live among Maala and Madiga children? I won't do it as long as I live. And that is final," said Lalitha.

"What's wrong in what I said?" asked Ammayamma garu, baffled.

"Ten thousand salutations to you and your patriotism. Whether we have anything to eat or not, we will suffer together. Why do you want to separate us? Allow us and our children to stay together. There are many children who can be admitted into the ashram; for example, your sister's children studying in Madras," said Lalitha.

Ammayamma's anger flared. She could not stay there a moment longer. Rising, she rolled towards the ashram, sorely hurt by Lalitha's remarks. There was no justification for Ammayamma's anger unless there was a weak point in her argument or heart. Else why would Lalitha's words affect her so?

34 Lalitha was still weeping when Chandrasekharam came home. Disturbed, he questioned her but she could not stop sobbing. He sat in a chair by her side stroking her head reassuringly. When Lalitha related what Ammayamma garu had suggested, Chandrasekharam seethed, and abused Ammayamma garu, who seemed to be determined to alienate him from his wife and children. If he had only met Ammayamma garu when he came home, she would have learnt what he was capable of.

Lalitha held his hand. "Whatever happens, we won't leave you. Where will we go?" she said and bathed his hand in tears.

"No one in the world can separate us," he comforted his wife.

Mallayya was the most important shavukaru of the village: only, no

one knew how much he had. When income tax officials could not assess his wealth, what estimates could ordinary people make? Whatever land he had was in the books of the karan-am¹ and therefore could not be concealed. For them it was clear that Mallayya had inherited twenty-five acres of wetland from his childless maternal uncle; fifty acres Mallayya's maternal aunt had bequeathed to him out of affection; a hundred acres came into his possession after the death of his daughter's husband. This piece of land, in the eventuality of the daughter's death, would revert to her husband's other heirs. Besides, what his father had left him was only a hundred acres: that too rather inferior land which yielded only a single crop a year and even that only about 360 kgs an acre, a very low yield.

Besides, Mallayya's family was fairly large: himself, his wife, a son, and a daughter. There was no earning member among them; only spenders! As if this was not enough, in his fiftieth year Mallayya had a son. Mallayya consulted an astrologer, who told him that the child would not live long. This must have been a great relief to Mallayya, who was groaning under the weight of poverty, although he didn't openly say so. But that is none of our business.

Mallayya was not educated. But such was his intelligence that he could understand any sastra² which had eluded even those who had worked on it for more than eighteen years or so. For example, take the energy in this universe. It is a constant: it can neither be increased nor decreased. It is inexhaustible. Consider how much research is needed to prove this theory! Especially, to contradict the recent theory that the sun was getting colder. Was it all so simple?

But Mallayya would prove it in no time. He could demonstrate the truth without any support. The energy in the world — 'money' — is a fixed quantum. It cannot increase. If a man grows richer, it means that others are losing proportionately. Similarly, if Pullayya was accumulating cash, he, Mallayya, was losing it. It needed the vigilance of a thousand eyes to protect what he had or to retain his status as shavukaru. It was because of such vigilance that the assets of the village brahmins, from lands to house sites had come into his grasp. If he hadn't been alert, what would have happened? Others would have snatched them away. At one time, it had taken all his energy to keep an eye on Chandrasekharam. Now there was nothing to worry on that score. Only Pullayya's affair was not yet clear.

36 Had Pullayya really stood guarantee? Life had treated Chandrasekharam roughly. It was necessary for him to stay away from further public scrutiny; and keep his word. Clearly, he wouldn't dare to do something so wrong. Even if he had, would it be that easy for him to accuse a man like Pullayya and prove it? Chandrasekharam was not such a dunce, untutored in the ways of the world. Though inexperienced, the bump on the head the factory business had given him would have opened his eyes. Given all this, he would not start legal proceedings against Pullayya without cause. So Pullayya must definitely be the offender.

But why had Pullayya done this? It was impossible for him to grab the mill: the Marwadis themselves would snatch it as an eagle would a chicken. They would not allow it to reach Pullayya's hands. Another possibility: did Pullayya have an eye on Chandrasekharam's house? How would Pullayya get it, when it was mortgaged to *him*, Mallayya? That was not it, then. So what was Pullayya scheming? That was unfathomable. Blast him! Pullayya who had been as meek as a calf had now grown long horns! Whatever the purpose, he was up to something big. He, Mallayya, shouldn't lie low now. He must personally stab Pullayya in the eye with his finger. If he succeeded in sending Pullayya to prison in this affair, there would be no one left in the village to challenge him. Even if the

ruined Chandrasekharam won his case, he, Mallayya, was in no danger of any sort.

It had therefore become necessary for Mallayya to somehow cut his rival to size. He stroked his moustache. "Aray, Gangadharam, come here!" he shouted. The twelve-year-old boy, playing bachalu³ by himself in the backyard, didn't respond. Mallayya shouted again. Hitching up his shorts, the boy came to Mallayya. His shirt was torn at the shoulders and Mallayya eyed it, "Ori vedhava⁴, are you playing with swords?"

"You didn't buy even a penknife for me when I asked for one. How could I possibly have a sword?"

"Don't be so clever! Veerayya is on the terrace. Go and fetch him. Be quick."

"What for?"

"Silly ass — you never do what you are asked. It is like a sickness."

"Veerayya! Veerayya! If you come to our house, my father says he'll break your bones — I'll say so to him."

"Will you come back home?" Mallayya shouted after him.

"Oh yes," Gangadharam shot back and making circles in the air with his arms, ran off. Mallayya went in and fetched two good lengths of tobacco. He was rolling one of them into a cheroot when Veerayya arrived. 37

"Did you send for me, bava⁵?" Dusting the pyol with the hem of his paipancha⁶, Veerayya sat on its lime-plastered platform.

"Take this tobacco leaf, tell me how the cheroot tastes. Someone gave it to me the other day, saying it was from the North. I doubt it."

Veerayya was an expert at assessing the quality of tobacco and cattle. He sniffed the stalk and said, "Yes, this is from the North, but it is not well-cured." He rolled it into a cheroot and lit it.

"They are talking about the occupancy rights of tenants. So I want to cultivate the land myself from next year. What do you say?"

"What can I say? By leasing out lands we gain nothing. They only become barren. Besides, the tenants are

accustomed to growing a second crop, so the fields become useless... then don't we need seven or eight pairs of bullocks and a lot of money to bring them back to a fertile condition?"

"Two pairs are enough for this year. I want to cultivate only twenty acres to begin with."

"I saw some good bullocks the other day. They were three moollu⁷ high. Maybe some four inches more. Good young bullocks. Pullayya's bullocks couldn't compare with them. Only, the man is quoting ten rupees more. But what a breed! What shapely crowns! Believe me, I could not tear myself away from them."

"By the way," said Mallayya casually, "you were in Madhavayya's service for some time, weren't you?"

"Oh, yes. For four years. I used to supervise everything that happened in the house."

"Did Madhavayya tell you anything about Pullayya's guarantee? I hear that it was Madhavayya who signed as a witness."

Veerayya scratched his grey hair. "I don't exactly remember," he said.

38

"Think it over and tell me, will you?" Mallayya stood up to go somewhere.

"All right," Veerayya threw away the cheroot and took a couple of steps.

"Look here, we'll set off on an auspicious day to buy the bullocks," the shavukaru reminded him. Veerayya said that he would definitely come, and left.

From that day Veerayya could think of nothing else. Veerayya knew that Chandrasekharam's future depended on him alone. Had Madhavayya told him, Veerayya, about it at any time? If he had — when? Was it during the ploughing season of the dry land? Or during the harvest? Probably not, because at that time Madhavayya had had an attack of asthma and was confined to bed. Haydust did not agree with him. So, it was not at that time, then. Probably it was during the first rains. Only the previous day there had been about four inches of rain, moistening the parched earth. Water had been released into the canals. The sky was overcast and it had been cool. That day Madhavayya and he had been on their way with

the ploughs tied upside down on top of the bullock's yoke, to till the western field. Yes, it was precisely at that time that Madhavayya had told him that Pullayya had stood guarantee to Chandrasekharam garu and that he had been a witness to the deal, placing his signature on the document. Veerayya could still hear his voice and his words. If he had only imagined them, how could he hear them?

But why was Mallayya bothered about all this? What would he gain by this business? Probably he was concerned with the justice of the matter.

On the third day after Mallayya had told him to try and recall the matter, Veerayya went up to him as he was sitting on the pyol of his house at dusk, and told him, "I remember everything now. Madhavayya garu told me about it at the time when the first rains set in. He said that Pullayya garu had stood surety for Chandrasekharam garu and that he himself had signed as witness. I don't know which world he has gone to after death, but he would never tell a lie. As for me, my feet are turned in the direction of the burial ground, so I don't need to lie either."

"That is good. If you had not remembered this, Chandrasekharam would not be able to escape prison. You have been sent by the Divine to help him. Go and tell Chandrasekharam to count you as a witness. Consider him forever in your debt," said Mallayya. Veerayya was about to walk away when Mallayya called him back. "Look, Veerayya, there isn't any good tobacco in the merchant's shop. We don't see hawkers with headloads of the stuff, either. Perhaps it's difficult for you to come by good tobacco leaves. Here are a few stalks for you," said Mallayya, as he gave Veerayya a quarter of a seer⁸ of tobacco and saw him off.

What a fair-minded man Mallayya was! How compassionate towards the poor!

Lamps were lit. Mallayya, fastening the uttareeyam round his waist and knees, was rocking himself to and fro thoughtfully. In that meditative state, it was difficult to say whether he experienced Saguna Brahman⁹ or Nirguna Brahman¹⁰. When he opened his eyes, he heard the student next door

reading his lessons aloud.

"Father, sister has readied hot water for your bath," Gangadharam told him.

"You bathe first. I'll return a while later," Mallayya told his son, and placing his *uttareeyam* on his shoulder, went out in the dark.

Satyanarayana Pantulu was intelligent: he could count your guts if you yawned. How could one get *him* to agree? Neither with dry bush nor with faggots would he burn! Satyanarayana Pantulu had studied everyone in the village. If he had been as meek as his father before him, the whole village would have been in dire straits. People like myself, Mallayya thought, would have been sent to the Land of Nowhere. Satyanarayana Pantulu wouldn't agree unless he was really convinced. He couldn't be tempted by money, either. But unless he took up the matter, the job on hand couldn't be completed. Somehow he must be compelled to do what had to be done. But by God, he shouldn't betray me, instead. Perhaps he wouldn't. Even if he did, he might have learnt by now that annoying Mallayya was like scratching one's head with a fire-brand. Knowing this, would anyone be fool enough to invite trouble?

Mallayya heard the *Bhajagovindam*¹¹ being recited in the house. He stood at the threshold and called out, "Pantulu!"

Inside, Satyanarayana Pantulu was teaching his son a lesson in Telugu. The boy was saying, "Father, why did the Telugu pandit in school explain it this way?" Satyanarayana Pantulu replied, "That explication is misleading. My explanation is the traditional one."

"If it is answered your way in the examination tomorrow, suppose they give me a nice round zero?"

"Why would they if you write the correct answer?"

Mallayya called out once again. This time he was heard inside. "Who is it?" Satyanarayana Pantulu said and came to the door.

"Pantulu, it's me."

Satyanarayana Pantulu peered at him in the dark from top to toe. "Is that you, sir? Come, let's go inside."

"Why, perhaps we can sit right here," Mallayya sat on the pyol.

Satyanarayana Pantulu shouted into the house. "Aray, ped-dabbayi¹², fetch a lantern and a mat!"

"Why all this trouble? Please sit down. I want to talk to you!"

"Did you have to come in the dark, sir? You could have sent your boy for me."

"I just left the field on the west side of the village and was passing your way. I thought I might as well talk with you."

Meanwhile Satyanarayana Pantulu's eldest son fetched a lantern and a mat.

"The lantern is not necessary. Take it in," said Mallayya. Satyanarayana Pantulu spread the mat on the pyol and asked him to be seated.

"All this is not necessary. Just a word in your ear. Give me a simple 'yes' or a 'no' to this question."

"With so many elders in the village, what can I say?"

"Aren't there? But they should be willing, shouldn't they? By the way, these thirty days... please don't tell anyone this, 41 not even to your shavukaru."

"You know, don't you, that I am Pullayya garu's clerk?"

"What innocence is this Pantulu! I don't poke my nose into other people's business. Have you ever heard of any such interference?"

"No, no, that is not it at all. I am merely telling you about my position. That's all."

"Well the matter is this. I have applied for a permit to run a bus. The permit will be issued in ten or fifteen days' time. Believe me, the route will yield a harvest of rupees. Some buses are also ready for sale. But you know that I know nothing about this business. And if I trust someone, what would I do if he drowned me midstream? As it is, I am very suspicious by nature. You are competent in every way. You will swim through these problems. I trust you more than I do my children. I'll put up the capital and give you a share in the profit. You will get two or three times more than what you are getting now, nothing less. What do you say? Say 'yes' or 'no'."

Satyanarayana Pantulu heard all this calmly. Many thoughts crossed his mind. Pullayya garu was giving him about six hundred a year. But Mallayya's proposal was good. It might even fetch more than he had promised. So why shouldn't he agree? If he didn't, how was he to manage his family? Especially when his expenses were mounting every year. But why was this man, Mallayya, trying to do him such a good turn? He hadn't given even a mustard seed's worth of help to Mallayya. That didn't mean Mallayya shouldn't help him. No, but when there were crores of people, why should Mallayya single him out? Perhaps he knew he was trustworthy. Was he, then, the only dependable person? Were all the others cheats? No, there must be something else in this proposal. What was that? Supposing there was a strategy. What would happen if he accepted? After the business began to run well he might be given the sack. What would happen then? He could make an agreement preventing this contingency. It was possible that Mallayya could involve him in extra-legal troubles beyond the contract and send him out. If a man did not take such risks, how would he progress? Up to this point, it was all right. But there was yet another side to the matter.

His father and he had worked with Pullayya all these years. Pullayya had cared for them like eyelids protecting the eyes. If he stopped working with Pullayya, would he be doing wrong by him? How would his leaving and going into business affect Pullayya? But why did this man, Mallayya, ask him not to say anything to Pullayya? The permit was yet to come and possibly he was afraid that Pullayya might create trouble with the authorities. Or, was Mallayya involved in any way in the forgery business? Apparently there was nothing. He was not even related to Chandrasekharam garu. Were there any party affinities? It was difficult to imagine, since these affiliations were not honest in any way. If anything, Mallayya might be involved in the forgery affair. Perhaps all this affection for him was because Mallayya wanted him to stand witness against Pullayya, not because he was reliable or efficient. He knew that he too had no experience in running a bus business. Still, if Mallayya was asking for his help, that might be the only reason.

If he was ready to stand witness against Pullayya, he could accept Mallayya's proposal. What was wrong if he told the truth when Pullayya was doing something unjust? Sending an innocent man to prison deliberately — what was more wicked than that? At the same time, should he harm Pullayya garu who had looked after him and his family all these years? Pullayya's motives also were not clear till now. Tomorrow he might acknowledge his mistake. And withdraw the case. So judging hastily or joining hands with Pullayya's opponents was not called for. But how was he to answer Mallayya?

"What is there to think about, Pantulu, to give me just one word in reply?" asked Mallayya.

"Where is the need to think? I am only trying to reckon the auspicious day. For my name and star¹³ the next six months are bad. Nothing I touch will flourish. Everything will turn to ashes."

"How orthodox you are, Pantulu! If we worry so much about these things, can we even eat?" Mallayya laughed spitefully.

"What can I do sir? I would compromise, somehow, but my father wouldn't."

"If you have a will, everything will be all right. And everything will seem contradictory if you set your mind against it. The new moon doesn't wait for the arrival of the son-in-law¹⁴. One should not raise the knee to block the goddess of wealth when she arrives, Pantulu!"

"I know you are telling me this for my own good, but what can I do? I don't want to step into anything during an inauspicious period with my eyes open. Neither would my father. I cannot flout the sastras that I have studied so carefully."

"So that is final, is it?"

"Forgive me. After six months, I shall come to you the moment you send for me."

"All right," said Mallayya and left. He thought, "Satyanarayana Pantulu is not easy to tackle. He is the white stone chip in cooked rice."

THE bull-calf, having fed, was frisking about in the backyard. Lakshamma sat on the kitchen floor, a knife by her, scraping the snake-gourd with a cockle shell. Pullayya was in an easy-chair in the terraced hall smoking a cheroot. Jaggarao, blowing on the whistle his aunt had sent him, was dragging a toy rattle-cart. Pullayya heard the bellow of the gambolling calf in the yard.

"The worker must have forgotten to tie up the calf. If it escapes into the street, it'll be impossible to catch it," he frowned, but did not feel like getting up. Still seated, he took out his cheroot and called out, "Nanna¹, nanna, do you hear me, babu²?"

"What is it, grandfather?" Jaggarao, arms akimbo, looked at him boldly, the string of the toy rattle-cart in his left hand and the whistle in his right. Looking at his unclad body, thighs, chest and tender cheeks, his grandfather was transported into a state of rapture. His black curly hair stirred in the breeze.

"Bujjai³ is running away. Nanna, go and tie him up."

"Bujjai? Tying? You can't see whath I doing?"

The grandfather smiled to himself. "You can drive the cart later. First go and tie up the calf."

"Grandfather, you losing mind, growing old. Whath happen if bujjai steps on me? Then you cries. I canth bear it."

Pullayya's wrinkled face opened up. From inside, the voice of his daughter-in-law was heard.

"Yemandi⁴, Jaggarao garu!"

Rangamma usually called her son "Babu," but when angry, addressed him by his full name. She was very patient and unlike Lakshamma, never made hasty remarks. She was a live coal of a woman, careful not to commit any mistakes. It was for that reason that she was able to get along with

Lakshmmamma. Pullayya also respected her greatly. Hearing his mother's call, Jaggarao went in obediently like a crushed louse, leaving behind the whistle and toy-cart.

"What is ith, Mother?"

"Look at me. Why don't you raise your face? What is it you have done today?" she demanded angrily.

"Whath I done?" rubbing his eyes with his fists he began weeping.

"I don't like this whimpering. Tell me the truth or you will get a spanking."

He shrieked as if he had been slapped. Lakshmmamma ran out to her grandson, the half-cut snake-gourd in her hand.

"You and your cursed anger! What have you done to the child? He yelled so sharply."

"Had I done anything more, would our house be in one piece? Keep quiet, you sly rascal." Rangamma, infuriated, picked up a rope meant for the well and glared at her son with reddened eyes.

"What has he done?"

"What is there he won't do? If he has done this today, to-morrow he will do something else. If one doesn't bend as a sapling, can one bend as a tree?"

"I haven't done anything grandmother."

"You rascal, haven't you taken out a ten-rupee note from the box? Are you not lying brazenly?" Rangamma threw away the rope but spanked him. Jaggarao bawled. Lying in his chair, Pullayya tried to divert his mind by counting the beams on the ceiling.

"First of all does he know what a ten-rupee note is? It must be lying at the bottom of the box, search for it. In the first instance, why didn't you lock the box?" roared Lakshmmamma.

"Did I dream that this rogue would be up to such things? Had I known I would have done whatever was needed."

Pullayya sprang up from the chair as if he had been scorched by a firebrand.

"What have you done? Tell me the truth." Rangamma spanked him again.

Pullayya felt as if he had received the blow on his back.

"I haven't taken it, Mother. Ask Raghavulu," Jaggarao sobbed.

"Why do you drag that innocent fellow into this? God takes away so many good people. But you and I won't die." She hit him again.

Pullayya covered his face with his hands.

"Mother, don't beath me, don't beath me. I tell the truth. My body will go red." Jaggarao jumped about in pain.

"Tell me, then," Rangamma yelled at him.

"I bought peas in Kotayya's shop.... Oh grandfather! Grandfather! I am dying!"

"Is that true? When did the sun rise and when did you buy peas?" She gave him another blow.

"True, amma, ask him. Kill me if ith is a lie," he said, snivelling between sobs.

"I'll find out from Kotayya. Don't beat him." Lakshmmamma, elderly and loving, walked fuming towards Kotayya's shop.

46 Pullayya, hands locked behind him, was pacing about restlessly in the hall.

Squatting on the floor and covering his face with her hands, Rangamma wailed, "O, God! See the fate you have given me! Though I have been deprived of a husband, I wanted to live for my son. With such habits how will he survive! How will he give me gruel in my old age? O, God! You took him, why didn't you take me too? How can I get on with this child! How have you created this deceitful world? Why couldn't you have made me barren? He is born to be spat upon. The bottom of a well or a pit is better than life for me." She cried out in grief, recalling the details of her life.

Pullayya was deeply shaken. He felt that he alone was the cause of her sorrow. His eyes filled quickly with tears. He was in a trance-like oblivion. Abruptly he walked up to his daughter-in-law and blurted out, "Amma, don't weep. The whole blame is mine. I won't do it again. I swear it on your feet." All at once, he prostrated before her. Rangamma was dumbfounded. When the elderly man fell at her feet, she froze. Without being conscious of it she stopped crying, stood up

quickly and stepped back a couple of paces. Jaggarao, sobbing and panting, his flanks rising and falling and his eyes closed, did not notice this. He was in a world of his own.

"Maamayya⁵, Maamayya," was all that Rangamma could utter.

With that Pullayya came back to his senses. He rushed to the hall and slumped in his chair. Rangamma stood immobile, unable to understand whether it was a dream or reality. Her father-in-law's behaviour was bewildering. She stood staring. Tear stains marked her cheeks.

Lakshmamma returned angry and abusive, "Kotayya's debt on this earth is paid. He can't live here much longer. Otherwise, why would he do this?"

"What is it atthayya⁶? Did he really buy peas?"

"It seems so. He gave a ten-rupee-note and asked for peas. Kotayya's son says he sold peas for half an anna and returned the change. Surely this is a lie. He must have given some peas and kept the note. After this, will he dare to live in this village? Where is the old man? He was here a while ago. Where has he gone loitering?" she said.

"Atthayya, where is the hurry? First let us find out the truth from your grandson. Aray, has Kotayya's son given you money?"

"Money? I bought peas, didn't I?"

"Now there is no doubt, is there? O, old man, come here."

"Yes," Pullayya moaned weakly.

"Today it is ten rupees, and tomorrow thousands. Get up, he must be called to the kutchery⁷ and beaten with chappals. Get up. Why are you still lying down?"

"Maamayya doesn't seem to be well. A moment before, he came here and fell down. Curse the money, we can think about it later. First go and attend to him, atthayya," said Rangamma.

Lakshmamma grew a little anxious and went into the hall. Her husband seemed to be all right.

"Why are you glued to your seat? Go at once," she said.

Pullayya slipped on the uttareeyam and slowly started out.

"Here, you Pullayya."

He looked back and sideways. He could see nothing. In front of him, at the distance, was a bull. Could a bull talk? He continued walking. "Here, you want to summon Kotayya's son to the kutchery and beat him with chappals. Because he has taken ten rupees unjustly. But what about you? Have you done less? Is it a lie that you stood guarantor for Chandrasekharam's loan? You tell me. Was it really forgery? Why shouldn't Chandrasekharam strike you with a chappal? Why should you be allowed to stay in the village at all? Because you are rich, you can get away with anything. Kotayya has no money and so you want to beat him with chappals. Is this justice? Is this gentlemanly? Speak, why don't you? How long can you play such tricks?"

Pullayya couldn't bear these words. He felt that a devil was after him. Terrified, he quickened his step.

"Pullayya garu, Pullayya garu."

He shook all over. Nervously he glanced sideways. Kotayya, a forty-year-old, was running towards him from the lane. The knot of his curly hair had loosened and he was trying to tie it with both his hands. The truss of his waist-cloth had slipped and the pancha⁸ was getting entangled in his legs. Pullayya stopped.

"Babu, there has been a mistake. In the morning, the child brought a ten-rupee note. My son gave him some peas, intending to send the note to you later on, but forgot because of business dealings. That's all there is to it. Please forgive us for this lapse. Here is the note." He took out the currency note from the folds of his waist-cloth and gave it to him.

Taking the note, Pullayya turned back, without a word. There was no trace of anger on Pullayya's face but Kotayya was very frightened. He turned back in awe-struck silence.

“S atyanarayana, have water, soap and a towel brought here,” Vasudeva Sastri said, having just left the bed of a patient. A flap at the back and folds in front dangled from his dhovati¹. On his bush-shirt lay a stethoscope slung from the shoulder.

“There is no soap,” said Satyanarayana Pantulu.

“At least have sunnipindi² and water brought here.”

Satyanarayana Pantulu’s eldest son brought the powder, water and a towel. Vasudeva Sastri rinsed his hands and dried them on the towel. The boy went inside.

“You are lucky. You are about to enter a period when you will save a lot.” Laughing, Vasudeva Sastri sat on the mat spread on the pyol outside.

“What is the saving you are talking about?” asked Satyanarayana Pantulu in surprise. Not that he did not know what Vasudeva Sastri was hinting at, but he did not want to imagine things for himself.

“Grain is very scarce, isn’t it? But from now on, you can save it,” said Vasudeva Sastri. Bitterly Satyanarayana Pantulu noted that Vasudeva Sastri was joking about a matter of life and death! He felt that though Vasudeva Sastri was his friend he could talk to him in this fashion because he, Satyanarayana Pantulu, was poor. Satyanarayana Pantulu hated himself.

“Does your science teach only ways of saving?” Satyanarayana Pantulu asked standing by the other side of the pyol.

“Silly fellow, why do you get so angry? Sit here, I will explain.” Satyanarayana Pantulu sat on the pyol. Vasudeva Sastri began again. “How old is your father? Isn’t he past eighty? How can medicines help him now? Nobody has eluded death until now. Nor do we know if anyone can. Money melted and poured might keep him alive for a few days more. You, of course, can’t afford it. Moreover, what more can the old man

achieve that he hasn't already?"

"Then why have you come to see the patient?"

"Precisely my thoughts... in fact, I did not want to visit, but my wretched physician's mentality permits no peace of mind. He, like the patient, fights till the end and preserves life, somehow or the other. His skills will not allow him to be indifferent. But forget that. By the way, your father has tuberculosis. Don't allow children near him. Give him whatever he wants to eat. You can't manage the cost of injections and other things. Give him four tablets from this bottle every four hours by dropping them onto a paper without touching them. Be careful, children may swallow them, because they are sugar-coated.

Sastri took a dram-sized bottle from his bag, and gave it to Satyanarayana Pantulu who carried it indoors and returned. Bag in hand, Vasudeva Sastri was ready to go. Satyanarayana Pantulu followed him, though the doctor tried to dissuade him. Neither spoke on the way. It was very dark. Supposedly a metalled road, it was full of potholes, with sharp, jagged stones protruding from it. They walked on without injuring their toes only because they were so used to these roads. Neither spoke.

Vasudeva Sastri was a strange man. Born into an orthodox family, he was both son and daughter to his parents, their only child. And they had raised him with great indulgence. His will had been law at home. He had studied English against his father's wishes and taken a Bachelor's degree. Ignoring his father's disapproval, he had gone on to expend the little they had left and taken a degree in medicine. Then his wife joined him.

He had no money to set up practice. Had he asked, his father-in-law might have helped him, but Vasudeva Sastri had been unwilling to approach anyone for help. In fact, that had not been the real reason. He had always had a strong desire to help the poor who had no medical facilities. The chance was at hand. Why shouldn't he fulfil his aspiration...?

He had been born and brought up in a village, and even sold his lands there to complete his education. So he felt that

the village had the right to look to him for some service. He therefore arrived in his village with some medicines. As was natural to all villages, his own village treated him with suspicion. Had he really studied medicine? If so, why had he settled in a village? Practice in a town would have fetched him a lot. There must be some mystery, decided the village. So the villagers who were better off did not seek his services.

After two months in the village, Achari garu learned a very great secret. True, Vasudeva Sastri had joined a medical college, but because he had misbehaved with a girl, — a class-mate — he had been debarred in the very first year of study. Thereafter he had roamed about for five years, and finally come back. So he had not studied any medicine. Some devotees of truth carried this news to Vasudeva Sastri and he did not react angrily. He did not even ask Achari garu, "What! Did you say such a thing sir?" Nor did he show his degree certificate to anyone.

Most villagers — from the coolie to the shavukaru — if they were able to move about, did not consider themselves ill. When one was in the throes of death or screaming in excruciating pain — that was illness. Or one should be bedridden for at least twenty days. A disease threw up some symptoms and so long as the symptoms mentioned did not appear, it could not be considered illness at all. Thus the affluent sought treatment in town and the lesser mortals went to Achari garu.

Not a single patient went to Vasudeva Sastri in the first four months. However, those who had drifted from physician to physician, swallowing all kinds of drugs till their mouths blistered and they lost hope — one or two of them came to him, But when such diseases were not cured anywhere, how could they be cured by him? He was not Dhanvanthari³. To such patients he bluntly explained their condition and this gradually strengthened his reputation.

Then occurred the incident of Mallayya garu's maternal aunt who developed a cancer in her breast. When she was first taken to town, they had operated on her. Since a complete removal of the malignancy had not been done, four years later

the tumour had recurred and was now the size of a large orange. When she was taken back to the same surgeon, he had expressed his helplessness and advised them to take her to the city. Knowing that that was futile, she had been brought home.

One day Achari garu came visiting on some work and examined the patient.

"Why take her to the city for such a small thing? Look here, I shall cure her in a fortnight. What do these so-called doctors know about healing?" The patient's hopes were roused and she asked him to start the treatment. Achari garu applied a poultice on the diseased part and by the third day, she felt a burning, unbearable pain. Unable to endure it, she had begged to be taken to Vasudeva Sastri.

If Vasudeva Sastri attended on her, Achari garu would be furious; if he didn't, Mallayya would be angry. Had the patient's suffering not been so great, Vasudeva Sastri would not have agreed to examine her. Unable to endure stories about the patient's hellish agony, he rushed to see her. It was breast cancer. There was a poultice of arsenic which had only blistered the skin painfully. He immediately peeled away the poultice, bathed the wound in an antiseptic lotion and gave the patient a painkiller. "Take her to the city at once. She will live if she is lucky, otherwise not," he said, not mincing any words. Moved by the patient's suffering, he went straight to Achari garu who stared at him with uncomprehending eyes.

"Have you examined the patient? Have you understood what the tumor is and its cause? You think by simply applying an arsenic poultice, your job is done? Where have you learned this kind of healing?" Vasudeva Sastri began chastising him.

"Oho, you even seem to know some medicine!"

"Why talk about my knowledge of medicine now? When Mallayya garu takes this to court tomorrow, you will have occasion to display your medical skills!" Vasudeva Sastri turned his back on Achari garu and left immediately for home.

Half an hour later, Achari garu, his fury spent, came to himself. What would happen to him if Mallayya garu filed a suit against him? He was capable of doing that, if he wanted

to. He would gain an enemy and also lose his name in the village. He shuddered. That night, he begged Mallayya garu to promise that he would not take the matter to court. What if Vasudeva Sastri went to court? After all that had happened, how could he beg him? Would Vasudeva Sastri withdraw proceedings against him even if he begged, especially when he had wronged him? The next day he consulted a pleader in town who made it clear that the matter could be taken to court and that a fine could well be levied. Seeing no alternative, he went to Vasudeva Sastri that night and fell at his feet. Vasudeva Sastri warned him not to practice such quackery.

Through Mallayya this news spread through the village and from then on Vasudeva Sastri's practice picked up. In addition, he cured four or five chronic cases. With that, the village was convinced that Vasudeva Sastri was indeed a qualified doctor of medicine. But money wasn't everything for him. He only took money from those who could afford it and did not charge the poor who couldn't. Some disliked his high charges, but there was no other doctor in the village.

Just as his practice was picking up, Vasudeva Sastri suddenly lost his wife. Some parents even offered their daughters to him in marriage. His aged father importuned him, "How can you cook for yourself? Marry again." He also said reproachfully, "Will you leave me alone with no one to look after me in my old age?" But in vain. Nobody knew Vasudeva Sastri's mind. When his father died, the villagers said that he had died of sorrow, but Vasudeva Sastri said that his heart had failed.

Meanwhile, the Quit India Movement of 1942 had started. Though Vasudeva Sastri had not been an activist, the government picked him up as a detainee. What political experiences he had in prison nobody knows, but his outlook underwent a radical change. Whether it was his stay in prison or the disgusting behaviour of his prison-mates or the books he read there, no one could tell. The books must have been to do with homeopathy. Otherwise, there was no reason why he should have begun dispensing sugar-coated pills after his release.

He now practised homeopathy as much as possible. His

patriotism and nationalistic zeal had waned. Failure to secure power or money were not the reasons. Though the party chiefs personally requested him to stand for the legislature, he refused. He was well acquainted with all the members of the committee that took care of political victims. In fact, they had pressed him to apply for the benefits freedom fighters received. "Why do I need any aid? I have no children. I'm a lone bird. My medicine chest'll help me fill my stomach which is the length of a hand span," said Vasudeva Sastri with a laugh.

When Vasudeva Sastri came home with Satyanarayana Pantulu, someone was sitting on the pyol. He could not recognise him in the dark. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Doctor garu, it's me."

"Who is 'me'?" asked the doctor, opening the door of the house.

"I am Mallayya garu's son. My father has sent me for medicine."

54 "Satyanarayana Pantulu, come in and be seated. I will give the boy some medicine and join you."

Satyanarayana Pantulu sat in the hall. Going into the next room with the boy, the doctor asked, "What is the problem, boy?" Satyanarayana Pantulu could easily over hear everything they said.

"Nothing. The body tingles and is numb, it seems."

The doctor laughed. "Is it your body or your father's?"

"Sir, what I wanted to say was that he is shivering, but instead I said he is numb. Actually father says that he feels as if his head is being axed apart."

Compounding a medicine, Vasudeva Sastri asked him, "Have you brought a bottle with you?"

Gangadharam felt in the pockets of his lagu⁴ and cried, "Sorry, sorry, sir. It's gone. What can I do? Well, doctor garu, if you can spare a bottle, I shall return it tomorrow morning."

"How many bottles have gone, now?"

"Well, sir, look here. Have I ever failed to return the bottle, when I said I would?"

"I didn't mean you, but"

"Some idiot might have forgotten to ... if everyone is like that, how can you dispense medicine and how can we take it?"

The doctor found an empty bottle, poured the medicine into it, and handing it over said, "Ask him to take half the mixture now and the other half tomorrow morning. Will you tell me how he is tomorrow evening?"

"Then this medicine is useless. I'll throw it away."

"You naughty fellow, what is this about throwing away medicine?"

"When you want me to report his condition tomorrow evening, it means he won't recover. What is the use of medicine that can't cure?"

"You needn't come to me. Your father will. Tell him that."

Gangadharam took a step and stopped. He started again and looked back at the doctor.

"What, boy? Do you need medicine for someone else at home?"

"Look here, doctor garu, if there is any medicine for miserliness, please mix it into this bottle. You will earn merit in heaven."

Puzzled, Vasudeva Sastri could not understand whether the boy was ridiculing his treatment, or making an innocent statement. Angrily, he said, "You say this today! Tomorrow you'll want me to mix poison. Just wait, I'll tell your father this."

"Sir, why are you angry? In school the other day you yourself said that the mind would be fine only if the body is all right. My shirts and lagu are torn, I wept and wailed. But he won't listen to my pleas. See for yourself, the bottle has slipped from the lagu and is lost. This would not have happened if the lagu had not been torn. This is not the only thing. He will not eat his fill, nor will he allow us to eat well. If he were healthy, would he have such a mentality?"

The doctor looked at the boy's torn lagu and at his face. He could not control his laughter. "That is a serious disease and can only be cured slowly. Can you go back alone in the dark or shall I send someone with you?" he asked.

"I have no such fear," the boy replied and slipped into the night.

Vasudeva Sastri came into the hall and asked Satyanarayana Pantulu, "Have you been listening?"

"Oh, yes. I couldn't spot any untruth in what he said," replied Satyanarayana Pantulu.

Vasudeva Sastri sighed, "What did you see in him?"
"Innocence."

"Is that all? He doesn't believe what his elders tell him. He must experience it, feel it is reasonable. Otherwise, even if you tell him something a hundred, a thousand times, he will not accept it. If anything appears reasonable, he follows it and respects those who express it. He doesn't have the slightest faith in what his father says, so he doesn't respect him. What have I done to him? Am I looking after him? Helping him in need and joy? No, but the respect and reverence he has for me, he doesn't, for his father."

"True, that much is clear," said Satyanarayana Pantulu.

56 "Not just he, human nature is generally the same. No one blindly believes anything, even if you tell him that the wise have said it. He asks why, examines its relevance, tests it from his own experience. If it stands this assessment, he respects it, tries to follow it. So, it's no use blaming this age and society — that they have no respect and faith. No use boasting about our greatness, our traditions. You have to show where your greatness lies and prove the unique features of your tradition and show its reasonableness and also realise it in practice. If you cannot, man will discard that greatness, that speciality. If he doesn't, he is not human at all.

"The basic struggle in our society today is this. Even the shruthis⁵ and smrithis⁶ are questioned. Man questions their justice, finding them inadequate in the present circumstances. He is anxious to create a new order. On the other side, another group incites unrest in the name of the nation, the people and the country. How are race, people and society different from individual groups? What is good for the majority, that is dharma, whatever is useful for them, that is sastra; and whatever gives them delight, that is kala⁷. This is what

they say. We cannot individually decide what dharma is or sastra or kala: these are decided by the majority. With these ideas they are driving people to a raging passion. And the people, forgetting that they can analyse things with their own wisdom, are being whipped into a mad frenzy.

“In these circumstances, there are only two paths for the minority of people like us. One is to cast off our individuality and identify ourselves with the majority. We have to accept everything they say and get to like the situation. Alternatively, overcoming narrow self-interest, we should be able to show a way useful to all of mankind, which means, to every individual, a way which we can prove to be logical, appropriate and practicable. We should ourselves practise them and bring them to the reach of everyone. That was why at one time the Buddha’s teachings spread not only in India, but also to other countries. Today, the wise have such a great duty. If these two things do not happen, we will be annihilated. This is the present situation.

“By the way, how did all this enter our conversation? Apparently there is no reason, but there must be some. The mind is like a monkey, leaping from one branch to another.”

Saying that it was late, Satyanarayana Pantulu rose to go. Vasudeva Sastri saw him off up to the road, returned and sat thinking. Why had Satyanarayana Pantulu come with him? What more was there to discuss about his father’s condition? He had told him all there was to know at the house. Perhaps Satyanarayana Pantulu accompanied him to say something else. What could it be? Could it be about the Pullayya-Chandrasekharam business? Was there any chance of his knowing about it? He was, of course, looking after Pullayya’s accounts. But could Pullayya have possibly said anything about this to Satyanarayana Pantulu? Perhaps Pantulu had wanted to talk to him about it, but changed his mind later. Could his advice have hurt Satyanarayana Pantulu? Actually, there was no reason for that. He could either take it or leave it.

But why was there this row between Pullayya and Chandrasekharam? Who was at fault? Pullayya didn’t seem like a man who would break a promise. Was he resorting to lies

because he was anxious not to lose money? Or, was Chandrasekharam himself guilty of this base act? Barring the two of them, who else could possibly know the truth? Both were taking the matter to court. In the enlisting of witnesses, rivalries in the village would intensify, inflaming rancour. Innocent people might lose their lives.

The cawing of a crow in trouble fetches ten sympathetic crows. Human beings are different. Troubles and joys were not things that descended from above. They were the result of enmity. Why didn't people have the amity that birds and animals had? Why were there such bitter quarrels and hostility? Why were co-operation, tolerance, sympathy and harmony on the wane? Would there be humanity without these qualities?

Why should he be bothered about these things? Wasn't he creating a sanctity, a god, with these ideas? Once a god was created, would He stay silent? He would gather a group of devotees whom He would distribute among the sinners. But why this hair-splitting analysis of dharma and adharma? Didn't everyone have the ability to think for himself? Was he in any way superior to them? Wasn't it egotistical of him to think of managing other peoples' problems? He should do only what his conscience dictated and follow what he thought was right. That was the only way for him to move on.

That night all the dishes in his house remained untouched.

TEN

.....

When Satyanarayana Pantulu came home, there was someone moving furtively near his house. He could not recognise him in the dark and so stood peering at him closely.

"Pantulu garu?"

"Yes, who is it?"

"It is me, Chandrasekharam."

"Is that you! Sir, come in, how long have you been here?"

"Perhaps half an hour. Please, will you come out with me for a while?"

Satyanarayana Pantulu understood why he was being asked to accompany Chandrasekharam — was it good to go with him in the dark? If, by chance, Pullayya spotted them together, what would he think? Not just Pullayya, anyone might grow suspicious. But, first of all, what was there to suspect? He was not doing anything wrong. He had never done such a thing until now, nor did he intend to do so in the future. So, why should he be afraid of anyone? Should one live in perpetual fear of others? What if Pullayya, seeing them together, sought to harm him? What would happen to him and his family? Well, was Pullayya paying and supporting him in return for nothing? Wouldn't the same drudgery, offered elsewhere, fetch a livelihood?

Satyanarayana Pantulu walked with Chandrasekharam in the dark. They came out of the village. Suddenly fear gripped him. Was Chandrasekharam bringing him out of the village with some evil intention? What if he killed him? What would he gain by killing him? On the other hand only if he lived might Chandrasekharam benefit. Did every action have a motive of self-interest? Why was a student murdered the other day and his body thrown into a well outside the village? The crime had not even been properly investigated. Suppose the same thing happened to him? It was his cowardice that prompted such thoughts. That was all.

Chandrasekharam sat on the bridge over the canal. Satyanarayana Pantulu sat by his side.

"Pantulu garu! You are a highly evolved person. No one can advise you. It is my anxiety that has brought you here at some trouble to yourself. I am not asking for undeserved help. If mine was an act of injustice, I wouldn't even dare to look at you. I have brought you here only to remind you to speak out on behalf of righteousness."

Chandrasekharam looked at Satyanarayana Pantulu who said nothing.

"What do you say?" Chandrasekharam ?

"Sekharam garu, I don't understand wh

I too have heard, like the others, that Pullayya garu has accused you of forgery. Only the two of you know what the truth is. How would the others know? Dharma can never be defeated, sooner or later it always wins. If you know the truth it would undoubtedly be justice to speak out. Nobody can deny that."

60 "Look here, you are in charge of all Pullayya garu's accounts. Don't you know the truth? You are trying to fathom my mind, and of course there is no harm in that. Pantulu garu, please think! If at all there is a drop of morality, discipline and culture in our society, it is the legacy of your Brahmin ancestors. Rising above narrowness and self-interest, they brought society to this level. The dharma for which they renounced the world and meditated — don't crush it under your feet. Dharma doesn't win by itself; man should foster and preserve it. I am not referring to dharma merely to promote my cause. I am a ruined man. Who will believe me if I were to say that I did this for dharma? No. According to the public, I did it only to squeeze and drink the blood of the workers, to uproot the tradition of our society. Who knows, my suffering must be the result of that terrible sin. I have to suffer the consequences of my sins. But what sin have my children committed? When I am jailed tomorrow, what will happen to them? Will they even get water to drink? Will they be able to live at least by manual labour? How will the girls get married? Not for me, but show a way for my children to lead a respectable life. You may have much to lose, to sacrifice, I know that. Pullayya might become furious, might try to wreak vengeance. But he can't destroy the respect you command. Nor your livelihood. If not for him, you can work for someone else as a clerk. As for me, I am not in a position to directly help you today. This is the situation. I wanted to explain this and seek your help."

Satyanarayana Pantulu was silent for a while. The silence terrified Chandrasekharam. He could hear the throbbing of his own heart. From a grove on the side, an owl hooted.

"Chandrasekharam garu, what can I say? Our ancestors, if they did anything at any time, acted in a detached manner,

without wanting anything in return. I am not in that condition. I have hunger and thirst. I am a dependent creature. Can such a man decide between justice and injustice? No, Chandrasekharam garu, only people like you are capable of that. What can men like me do? I am a very ordinary person. I am not aware of my own position. I am hardly competent to even think about it. Why do you drag me into this business? In matters of good and bad, people like me would try to follow your example — even for that, some strength of mind is called for. But that too seems to be absent in me. Chandrasekharam garu, please forgive me. Beyond this, there doesn't seem to be anything I can do."

"Is that all?" said Chandrasekharam, depressed. "If *you* were in my place, what would you do?"

"I am not saying you are at fault. I wouldn't. I can't. I am only submitting *my* position."

There was silence for some time. Then, Chandrasekharam said, as if talking to himself:

"I seem to have misjudged things. I thought that good and bad, dharma and adharma are decided individually and practised. No, the community has to decide them. Society has to judge what is dharma and what is acceptable practice, and that means that brute strength decides those issues. Those who can lure the majority to their side... theirs is justice and theirs dharma. Small wonder then that the theories and ideas of the sastras are the hand-maidens of money. What Pantulu garu has said is right. Yemandoi¹, I cannot forget your advice. I have troubled you and brought you here for no reason. Please pardon me. Are you coming to the village?"

Chandrasekharam got up and Satyanarayana Pantulu followed him. Chandrasekharam turned to go to his house. Satyanarayana Pantulu thought that he would visit the doctor. Walking for some distance in that direction, he stopped. Why should he disturb the doctor's sleep at this hour? The doctor had already expressed his opinion clearly. If he were to report this, what fresh advice could he tender?

Satyanarayana Pantulu saw Pullayya in his mind's eye. "What Pantulu," he seemed to be saying, "I have helped you

and your father all these years. What are you upto now? Joining hands with my adversaries to destroy me? If your children used this policy against you, how would you feel? Would there be any family life left? Do you suppose that Drona² did not have your passion for dharma? In what way are you superior to him? Though he knew clearly that the Kauravas³ were unjust, why did he not join the Pandavas⁴? Why are you silent, Pantulu? What colour is justice? White or black? How do you know?

What can you alone hope to attain? Don't mess the food you eat. Only the two of us know whether or not I stood guarantee. It does not mean that others need to know it too. No one will say that inspite of knowing the truth, you said otherwise. If it comes to that, will I not support you? Will I remain a passive spectator? Any blow that falls on you is one that I receive too. Come to me and discuss these questions of dharma with me, if you can, but don't behave foolishly." The voice warned him.

True. Why should he be hasty? Pullayya might have gone to court on a misunderstanding. He could still withdraw the suit. He certainly would. If Chandrasekharam was sent to jail unnecessarily, how would it benefit him? After observing things, he, Satyanarayana Pantulu, could do something, if needed. What was the urgency to make any sudden moves now?

Satyanarayana Pantulu went home. The bed creaked for just a while longer than usual.

ELEVEN

The day of the hearing drew near. Pullayya had no mind to proceed further, but there was no way to wriggle out of it either. Once he was in the witness stand, how many lies would he have to utter!

His rheumatic pains worsened, allowing him to neither

bend nor sit. What would happen to one who acted unjustly? Would Iswara¹ stand by and watch? No, suspicion itself was a disease. His anxiety was unnecessary. What sin had he committed now for this disease to appear as a retribution? In fact, it should have appeared earlier when he had given the lawyer's notice. His fears were unfounded.

Pullayya grew somewhat restless with these troubled thoughts. Might this restlessness cause him to talk in his sleep? What if the old woman were to hear it? Would his reputation remain intact? She would inform the daughter-in-law. What would *she* think? Would he command respect again in his own family? Would Sita and Ramudu even look at him? He shuddered to think about it. From that day he began to lose sleep. If he sometimes nodded off, it was only when everybody else had gone to sleep. He also woke up before the others did. How long could this go on?

Was there no way of withdrawing the case? He thought about it. If he withdrew, would it stop Chandrasekharam? Besides the five thousand he had wasted on Chandrasekharam, how much would he have to pay as defamation charges? Who could he share this pain with?

On hearing that Satyanarayana Pantulu's father had passed away, Pullayya called on him to condole with him and his family. In fact, Pullayya and the senior Pantulu who had just died were not very different, except that Pantulu had probably been ten to twelve years older than him. Terror gripped Pullayya: he too had to die. It was only a question of when — the next or the day after. Were these pots of clay permanent?

That night he lay tossing. On a small bed nearby was Lakshamma. She did not appear to be asleep.

"Ammi, ammi," he called her.

"What is it?"

"Death is certain, isn't it? Knowing that, why do people do so many vile things?"

"True, they act as if these bodies and riches will endure forever. Why they do so, no one can understand."

There was silence for some time. Then Pullayya sighed and

said, "Ammi, look here, aren't we doing so many wicked things without our knowledge? In that case, how can we say that this is a good deed and that bad?"

"Stop it! If anyone were to hear you, he would laugh! How can bad become good, and good bad? Day is day, and the night the night. As the years overtake you, you are losing your mind."

There was thunder and lightning that night, followed by a heavy downpour. Pullayya's conscience kept up the debate.

"All right, Ammi, tell me this. A man dies only after sinning. He suffers appropriate punishment in hell. So far, so good, but some innocent ones also suffer the consequences of that sinful act. Why is it so? They too must have sinned in their previous lives. So, sin is not committed by an individual, it is related to a group of people. Doesn't that mean good and bad are not actions done by an individual? In that case, why do they tell people, 'Do good. Don't do anything wrong?' Even though a sinner suffers punishment, the sin does not disappear. Then where is the necessity for heaven and hell?"

64

"Good, bad, virtue, sin — humans cannot understand these terms. Words spoken by incarnations of the divine — why do you speak them?"

Lakshmamma rolled over on her side and went to sleep.

Pullayya shut his eyes. Chandrasekharam's children appeared before him in tattered clothes, unkempt hair and sling pouches for begging. "You wicked man! See what you have done? You have brought ruin on our heads. Were you content with this? You have sent our father to jail and ruined our family name. You made it impossible for us to even get a drink of water in the community. You are the cause of all our misery. Will such sin go unpunished? Your son, daughter and daughter-in-law, grandsons — won't they also suffer like us, wandering like homeless crows, cawing wildly and dying in despair? The curses of the young will not go in vain. You will reap it many times over. It is certain, it is certain." They appeared to be cursing him. He trembled and perspired.

He moaned in pain and rolled over on to the other side to try and get some sleep. Again, he fell into a light doze. The

hearing had begun. An official asked him to take the oath and tell the truth. He felt giddy and collapsed in the witness stand like a limp creeper. With that Pullayya woke up with a shudder. Lakshmamma was fast asleep. What was the time? There was no way of knowing even if he went out, because the sky must be overcast with clouds. If he was declared guilty and sent to prison for a term, would Chandrasekharam's suffering be mitigated? How, without a care, the old woman slept on! How could these people sleep so soundly?

Next morning, on his way to the fields, he saw Mallayya approaching from the opposite direction. Mallayya smiled and mumbled, "Going to the fields?" Pullayya nodded. Was Mallayya's smile genuine? How full of poison he was! If it had been Mallayya instead of Chandrasekharam that he had to contend with how good it would have been! Settling scores with him would have held a kind of beauty. Their relative strengths would have also become clear. Chandrasekharam was really a weakling. He was completely ruined and ready to fight, even unrighteously. What could be meaner than this? Pullayya felt disgusted with himself. He bit the end of the cheroot and spat it out.

That night he had cold shivers. Surely, it was typhoid. Death was certain. His sin had rebounded on him. Wasn't there a God? One could close men's eyes, but how could you close His eyes? Impossible.

By the way, hadn't Potti Ramayya reported to him that Chandrasekharam and Satyanarayana Pantulu had been seen together late at night. Perhaps Chandrasekharam was trying to win Satyanarayana Pantulu over. Satyanarayana Pantulu was no fool and would not spoil his life with his eyes open. Shouldn't Satyanarayana Pantulu have told him about this? But who knew what snake lay waiting in which anthill? Why all this bother? There was no difficulty in being straightforward! Why had he, Pullayya, got into all this trouble? Wasn't all this hit-and-spar only for a word? For a single word why should he commit such a monstrous wrong? If he told the truth to the old woman next morning, it would be all right. Then, in the evening, if he went to Seshagiri he would look

after the rest. To what end all this heartache?

Suddenly he felt as if a pan of hot coals had been lifted off his chest. Relieved, he sighed deeply and fell asleep happily.

Even when the sun rose steadily and the bull-calf bellowed for milk, Pullayya did not wake up. Lakshmamma stood at the door of his room and shouted, "Old man, wake up. Do you hear?" He rolled over on his other side and continued to sleep.

"Do look! Somebody has come for you."

Rubbing his eyes he sat up and yawned. "Who is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. He is in the backyard."

Hurrying into the yard, Pullayya saw Veerayya. Had he rushed outside for this useless fellow?

"What is the matter, Veerayya! So early in the morning?"

"Nothing. But I wanted to tell you something."

"What is it?"

"You have filed a suit, haven't you?"

"But what does....."

"I won't give evidence against you."

"Has anyone been asking you to do so?"

"No."

Pullayya grew suspicious. Someone was tempting Veerayya with money. So Veerayya must have come now to try and strike a deal. Otherwise, there was no need for Veerayya to confide in him thus.

"Has Chandrasekharam been buying tobacco for you?" Pullayya asked.

"No one can force me to talk. God alone is prompting me to speak up."

"To say what?"

"What else? I came with you and Madhavaiah to the town that day."

"What day was that?"

"The day you signed as guarantor."

Pullayya stared hard at him. "You've lost your mind. Why do you invite trouble? Hadn't you better sit in a corner chanting the names of Krishna and Rama?"

Another idea lit his mind. "You are not in your right mind. I'll have it deposed in court that you are unfit to give evidence."

Veerayya left.

"These fools! Do they think they can get the better of me? These idiots who don't have a morsel to eat! If a wrong is done the vengeance is the Lord's. Who are these fellows to interfere? If they dare to, they will taste a bit of Pullayya's strength." He twirled his moustache in anger and pride.

Later while serving him, Lakshmmamma said, "Have you heard this? Ammayamma guru, it seems, had visited Lalitha to enquire after the family. She offered to take the two elder children to the ashram, as Lalitha is finding things difficult, but it appears that Lalitha abused her roundly. As the saying goes — that's how the matter is."

"Who told you this?"

"Yesterday afternoon when Ammayamma came to our home, She related this with tears in her eyes. Lalitha seems to have heaped abuse not only on Ammayamma but on her younger sister also. If she hadn't said anything would Ammayamma have wept?"

Pullayya just nodded but didn't say anything. He thought, Ammayamma herself would do what he should. Mixing truth and lies, she would damage Chandrasekharam's reputation and that of his family to the greatest degree possible. If he could be a bit active now, it would be Chandrasekharam that everyone suspected, not himself. He thought he should not let this opportunity slip.

In the meantime, a rumour went round that Chandrasekharam had given his brief to Chalapathi Rao who had no practice at all. Pullayya thought, "How can that dumb lawyer win the case?" Pullayya heard the lawyer had said that he would not only prove Chandrasekharam's innocence but also get damages for defamation. Pullayya learnt that Chandrasekharam had gathered witnesses to prove that Pullayya was responsible for the closure of the paper-mill.

Pullayya guffawed. Suddenly he felt elated. So he was responsible for the paper-mill closing down! How shameful to

tender false evidence! Those who had abandoned self-respect would be ready for anything, even murder. How could he live, tolerating such people? Their destruction was surely one's duty.

Chandrasekharam circulated rumours that Pullayya had cheated the villagers in the turmeric business, that he had appropriated the yield from seven acres of the choultry² for which he was the trustee; otherwise, the rumour went on, how could the owner of three acres build a terraced house and put fifty thousand into money-lending?

To Pullayya this news was like chilli powder rubbed into the skin. Entirely forgetting his own mistake, he felt that the world was working against him unjustly and that it was his solemn duty to defend himself. With this, whatever hesitation, uncertainty, there had been suddenly disappeared and he grew supremely self assured.

His attitude hardened.

68 Once he gained peace of mind, his rheumatism disappeared in no time. He began thinking about Chandrasekharam's moves and what counter-moves *he* should make. Now his opponent was not Chandrasekharam, but those who were willing to give evidence on his behalf. Pullayya began recollecting their past and all the harm they had done him. Now it was necessary to square accounts with them.

That fellow Potti Ramayya had been hacking a part of the boundary of Pullayya's field every year. And this fellow, Mallayya, was giving him a lot of trouble, blocking access to the field. Just as he prepared to buy a load of turmeric, Mallayya paid half a rupee more and had the whole lot sent to his store house. If what Mallayya wanted was only the merchandise, couldn't he have got it elsewhere? No, Mallayya's chief purpose was to inflict a loss on Pullayya. No one knew what accursed star he was born under. By nature he couldn't bear to see others prosper. The village would be rid of all trouble, if it could get rid of Mallayya. It must be he who was inciting Chandrasekharam who wasn't usually wrong-headed. Mallayya was also interfering in the running of the school and influencing the Panchayat Board. Only a stunning blow to his

head would bring him back to his senses. And only then would the village improve. This business was not Chandrasekharam's doing at all. The key person was Mallayya himself. Pullayya would never catch Mallayya singly another time. This was the opportunity to get even with him.

Pullayya shook off his fits of shivering completely. He had not committed a hundred mistakes. Even the one that *had* been done was not by him. Why should he be afraid of this sinful world? Whom should he fear? Discreetly he began to gather information about the rumours people were spreading about him. As he heard the charges, his attitude stiffened further. He found it quite possible to forget the real issue.

One day he heard that he and his son were being called communists, that he had sent his son underground, it seems, secretly supporting him in every way. If his son was not a communist, why did he not come to the village? — people asked. In fact, Pullayya's family wholeheartedly supported nationalism. Were they all not in khadder — from his daughter-in-law to his grandson? How could his family then be communists? Would they denounce his son to the police? What should he do to these people to make them pay for their sins?

On the days he did not hear accusations against himself, Pullayya felt restless. He would imagine the world concocting charges against him. He would imagine them saying that he had turned against Chandrasekharam for fear of Lakshamma. Was he doing this because he was afraid of his wife? Was he really afraid of his wife? Wasn't that a black lie! People detected their own qualities in others. To the bad, the world only appeared bad, would it be any different?

Cooking up charges against himself unconsciously, Pullayya gathered witnesses and got ready for the trial.

“What should we do now?”

“Have dinner.”

“Why such sarcasm?”

“Sarcasm? There are people howling for food and here you are obstinately refusing to eat. Will the world improve with the existence of a single person such as yourself? Tell me — are you certain that you will get even this morsel of food after a few days?”

“Why bother about all that now? Knowing he is innocent, should Chandrasekharam be sent to prison? If he is not sentenced, then the old man must be. Even if I completely disown him, he is still my father. I was born to him and he raised me in his arms. How can I send him to jail? How will he survive imprisonment at his age? He cannot survive even a minute without good tobacco. What would happen if he were sentenced to a year or two in jail? Besides, whatever his fate or condition, what will happen to the family? Mother, and with her Sita, would be prostrate with sorrow. Would I command any respect in the village? Wouldn't they point to me as the member of such and such a family? Where would I hide my face?”

“That's why you have got a room here. You can hide here. Don't worry.”

Ramarao was getting carried away by such arguments and counter-arguments. His fingers touched the sides of the camp-cot, but his mind failed to reach a shore of any kind.

Ramarao was Pullayya's younger son. He had taken an M.A. degree from the Calcutta University. His father hoped that he would be satisfied with this achievement and find a job. But Ramarao's thirst for knowledge was unquenched. The situation in the country and the chaos in international

affairs challenged him. He longed to discover the quintessence of the ideas that had sprouted in the economic, political and cultural fields. Unmoved by the demagoguery of the country's leaders, he had become anxious to find out for himself what truth and untruth were.

Disregarding his father's advice, he stayed at Madras and gradually began his philosophical enquiries. He felt that his eyes had opened to new realities. All the events that occurred in different fields of human endeavour were only irregularities which, if continued, would certainly not hasten the development and progress of humankind. Love of liberty and search for truth were natural to man and formed the substratum of his life. Both instincts were possible only through one dharma. In its absence the wheel of life would sink into an ignoble mire. Man would plummet to the meanest level. He had published articles saying that this was the root cause of the country's debasement. He had also been expounding the idea at student gatherings.

But this very Ramarao was now faced with a tricky problem. His mother Lakshmamma had got a letter written by his sister-in-law saying that Chandrasekharam had produced a false document which said that Pullayya had stood guarantee to a Marwadi for him and that Pullayya had taken the matter to court. On seeing the letter, Ramarao was astonished. His father himself had told him that he had stood surety for Chandrasekharam. So there was no meaning in filing a case against Chandrasekharam. Known to him, father had never stooped to doing anything unjust. Why was he doing so now? Perhaps he had filed a suit by oversight. Surely, there was no other reason.

With this in view, he had written to his father reminding him of the facts. He received a reply that day. "You know nothing about this case. So you had better keep quiet. Your mother also has asked you not to come here at this time."

This advice was the cause of his present state of mind. He now remembered the words he had uttered at a gathering of students the previous day:

"Brothers! Today prices are soaring, and people's minds are

degenerating. What's the reason for all this? The corruption rampant in our leadership. It is a mistake to suppose that this debasement is the result of newly-acquired positions of power. It is imbedded in the very principles they have been propagating from the start. So long as the doctrines remained doctrines, we could not understand the inherent dangers in them. Now that they have been applied, their rottenness is becoming apparent. From the beginning, political leaders have been exhorting people to fight for the country's liberty and the country's greatness in the name of our nation and society, thereby creating a new goddess. They said that individual dharma lay in self-sacrifice at the altar of this goddess. But what are they doing now? They are still working for the greatness of the nation, still toiling for it.

"A country dependent on others cannot become great. Self-sufficiency in food stuffs must be achieved, which means that imports should be totally banned. The army must be strengthened. No nation can have a modern army without heavy industry. To acquire machinery for heavy industry, exports should be increased. What can our country, a chiefly agricultural country, export? Tobacco, jute and others are commercial crops, aren't they? Some part of our land is used for growing such crops. As a result, scarcity of food grains has increased. Prices have escalated. When the price of food grains goes up, how can the prices of other things not follow? If there is a chance for prices to increase, people try to hoard, to earn huge profits. One who does not, must be inefficient and utterly stupid. Is there anyone who finds money and power bitter? Aren't these the forces that drive men?

"So it is clear there is some deficiency in the very doctrines of our leaders. A nation is a group of people, nothing more. The progress of the group is the progress of the race. Human life is for life's sake, not for any other-worldly benefit. *That* dharma is the essence of human life. Why does the mother love her child? Not because she believes that he will one day care for her. Love is the supreme state of her life. In it lies both joy and self-realisation. No reward is sought in the quest for dharma. Man's conscience is the ultimate proof.

And conscience is always spurred on by wisdom.

"To be rid of present evils, everyone should overcome fear, greed, power-mongering and favouritism, and continue the effort with a strict observance of dharma. Neither popularity nor others' sympathy, nor the question of one's name appearing in the papers should matter. Progress of the individual, and through him of society, is attained only if this dharma is observed joyfully. There is no path but this. If we don't follow it, the present will become a hell-hole and the future uncertain."

After preaching his ideas thus, how could he face the students? Discarding modesty and self-esteem, if he met them would they respect them? Regardless of their show of esteem, would he have peace of mind?

Ramarao got up and began pacing about excitedly. He chain-smoked, the fumes filling the room. His mind, however, did not reach any shore. He read his father's letter again. "You know nothing about this case. So you had better keep quiet." This sentence made it clear that his father was deliberately taking Chandrasekharam to court. If that was the case, what was the use of reminding him of the truth? The alternative was that he should tender evidence in favour of Chandrasekharam. Then his father was sure to be sent to Krishna's chamber of birth¹, resulting in chaos, making it impossible for him to even visit his home. Mother would refuse to receive him. Sita was yet to be married. Who would marry her after what was sure to happen? Would upholding the truth result in such things? Were truth and dharma so terrible? How easily he had criticised others! Wasn't human progress the goal of dharma? What if he took a vow of silence? In that case, all these afflictions would envelop Chandrasekharam and his family.

Ramarao could not decide one way or the other. Death was preferable to helplessly witnessing such horrendous events. But not even death would prevent injustice from being perpetrated. So what was the use of his death? He should somehow persuade his father to confess and withdraw the case. If father did not agree, he would reap the fruit of his own

actions. There was no other way. He had to go home immediately. It was to prevent his visit that father had written to say that his mother had asked him not to go to the village. Except doing what was expected of a human being, what else was there for him to do?

He folded the camp-cot and packed it into a case. He gathered the scattered books and placed them in a box. While he was packing his clothes, he heard a knock on the door. "Who is there?" he asked, but received no reply. Only the sound of the door-chain.

"Who is there? The door is open."

"Annay²."

The door opened slowly.

"Oh, is that you? When did you come?" Ramarao closed the box and asked her to sit on it. He sat on the window sill. Sita looked around the room and said, "It appears you are on the move. Are you getting a new room? I would not have been able to meet you at all, if I had, by chance, come tomorrow."

74 "Why are you standing? Do sit down. Have there been any letters from home? How are mother, vadina and Jaggadu?"

"They're all well. But tell me, why do you need to change rooms so suddenly?" Sita asked, sitting on the box.

"Who told you that I am shifting to another room?"

"Then are you going somewhere?"

Lighting a cigarette, Ramarao nodded.

"Where?"

"Home. Where else can I go?"

"Home! Really! Look me in the face and say that again! Annay seems to be learning how to tell lies these days!"

"It's clear who has been learning to do that."

"Annay, tell me the truth. Are you really going home? You haven't, for more than a year and a half. Now how can I believe you, if you say you are?"

"Father has written to me."

"What does he say?"

Looking at his sister, Ramarao said calmly, "What is there to say? He writes that the marriage is settled, and asks me to come immediately."

"I don't believe it. I don't. He hasn't written to me at all," she said.

"Has a wedding been arranged for you or me?"

"Even then! How can there be a wedding without my approving the bride? Surely mother or father would have written at least a word to me!"

"It is I who am getting married," said Ramarao. "How do you come into the picture? I like the girl and have decided to marry. How does your opinion matter in any way?"

"Let's see how you will marry!"

"Where is the difficulty? The purohit³ will chant the mantras⁴. The three knots⁵ will be tied. The bride will ceremoniously take leave of her parental home. Then arrive at ours. Sita will perform harathi⁶ at the doorstep."

"Sita is not your maid-servant to do your bidding," she said.

"That is what I think too."

"What do you think?" Sita shouted at him.

"That you are not a servant, that you can distinguish between right and wrong, that you have self-respect and know how to preserve it."

"I think you're making fun of me. You want to find out how I will respond. Annay, tell me if what you say is true. If it is, I too shall go with you with the permission of our warden." She looked at her brother with moist eyes.

"You silly girl."

Ramarao sighed. He hesitated, pondering whether to tell her what injustice father was about to commit. If he did not tell her, she might be hurt. If he told her it would cause her great anguish. Should he needlessly inflict pain on another creature? He could give some plausible explanation and send her away, but he disliked doing that. Besides, he wanted someone who would understand and sympathise with him. He was in no position to assess the loss if there was no such person. So he thought it was better to tell her the facts.

Sita sensed that he was struggling to tell her something. She went up to him and stroking his hair asked, "Why do you keep secrets from me? Am I a stranger? Am I unreliable? Won't you tell me what the matter is?" Very slowly, Ramarao

told her, "Chandrasekharam didn't forge the document. Father really is his guarantor. Father himself told me this. I don't know why he is filing a case now. It cannot be an error. I reminded him of this in a letter. Then he wrote back, 'You know nothing about this, so you had better keep quiet. Your mother also has asked you not to come here at this time!' We must somehow persuade father to withdraw the case. Time is very precious, and regretting things later will be useless."

On hearing these words, Sita slumped, appalled, as if struck by lightning. Dazed, she sat with unseeing eyes. Five minutes passed in silence. Ramarao too was silent.

"Annay...", she said in a tremulous voice, flicking off a tear with the little finger of her left hand.

"Sita, I know what you are going to say. You want to say that father might not have told me what he did. You suspect that I am mistaken. Isn't that right?"

Sita nodded.

"At first I did think I was deluded. But I wasn't mistaken. Tell me, why should I be angry with father? The mind can subconsciously create a delusion arising from anger. But there is no anger. If I were angry, I would testify in favour of Chandrasekharam and send father to prison. Such a thought doesn't even enter my dreams. I am only anxious that the case be withdrawn. I distinctly remember father asking me not to tell mother about it. His words still ring in my ears. Is this something my mind has conjured up? No, Sita. I think your respect for father and fears about your future make you suspect my words."

"Is that all, really?"

"Yes, I think so. The chief thing is to have the case withdrawn. That's the purpose of my journey. Then whatever is to happen will happen. Who can fight overwhelming odds? Sita, don't be unhappy. Don't ruin your studies unnecessarily worrying about these things. If there is any benefit in worrying, then we can worry, but there isn't any. I'll write to you after things take shape. Don't worry."

Sita rose slowly. On Ramarao's insistence she freshened up. He dropped her at her hostel in a taxi and took the Mail train that very day.

“The sun hasn’t set yet; how can people go to sleep at this hour?”

“What is this nagging in my ear! Why can’t you sleep peacefully?”

“First you ruin my sleep. Next you growl at me. Now isn’t that justice!”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“There are swarms of mosquitoes. What can I do?”

“Cover yourself completely with the sheet.”

“As it is I’m perspiring.”

“Who made you perspire?”

“You should say that turning to me. What’s the use of saying it lying on the other side?”

“This is a plan to somehow spoil my sleep. Don’t I know you? — One should have some sense.”

“Where are they, those nasty rats. So many! Will they eat us alive?”

“You mean the two legged rats.”

“If you don’t believe me, look at the eaves on the roof. Look! Oh God, how many there are! One, two, ten! The whole house is teeming with rats... Will they really eat us up?”

“Strange. Where have they all come from?”

“See how fearless they are! Do you think they’ll drop on us?”

“Let it be, something’s burning! I can smell it.”

“You always smell something!”

“No, this is different, there is some kind of smell.”

“That gnawing sound makes me shiver. Chase them off!”

“All right, if your highness orders so.”

“Oh, oh, what is this again?”

“You asked me to chase them away. They are at the roof level, aren’t they? How will they go?”

"All right. You needn't chase them. Please be quiet. The child will wake up."

"Should everything be as you wish?"

"Oh, stop it. It was all my stupidity. Why should I have woken you up?"

"They aren't going away, are they?"

"Oh God! God! Fire, there is a fire!"

"It can't be true."

"Ammo, ammo, the house — the house — it's on fire. Do you hear?"

"Satyanarayana garu, Satyanarayana garu, the house is on fire. Sir, open the door! Please open the door!" Someone was hammering on the door.

Padma pushed Satyanarayana Pantulu away with all her might. He tripped and fell at a distance. "Oh God, my child, my child!" she shouted and, lifting the child sleeping on a cot some distance away, rushed towards the door. The knocking on the door continued, flames reached the top of the cottage, smoke filled the house. It was then that Satyanarayana Pantulu came to his senses. He dashed towards the room in the west. Padma could not see her husband or her eldest son. Wailing, she pushed open the front door, screaming and shireking to be saved. All the people gathered outside rushed in together. Meanwhile Satyanarayana Pantulu escaped from the house with his eldest son.

All the neighbours woke up at this tumult. People living in huts began taking out their belongings and throwing them out into the open. Everyone was trying to help put out the fire. But they were hampered by the lack of a ready supply of water and the clouds of billowing smoke. However, they stopped the fire from spreading to the neighbouring huts.

Satyanarayana Pantulu, his wife and children were in a state of complete shock.

"How did the fire start?" someone asked.

"How will our troubles subside by relating our woes? Our fate has swept over us like a wave," said Satyanarayana Pantulu.

Padma began sobbing. "My eyes aren't yet dry from

mourning my late father-in-law. This twist of fate has also fallen on us. Oh God, have you decreed even the loss of our house? What sin have we committed?"

"Amma! Console yourself, Amma! It's no use wailing over what has happened. It is good that at least the four of you are alive. Otherwise, what would have happened?" exclaimed the Brahmin woman living next door.

"This is the deliberate act of some miscreants, not something accidental," said an old man.

"Who would set fire to the house? Who are Pantulu's enemies in the village?" asked another.

"No, someone has done it on purpose. There is no check or control in the village. Such attitudes will improve the village rapidly — surely! Amma, take my word, this is not the end. Bad times produce distorted fruit shaped like a dog's mouth¹," said the old man.

After the flames subsided, people began leaving one after another. Some said the fire had been caused deliberately and others argued that the fire was accidental. But whatever it was, Satyanarayana Pantulu's house was burnt to the ground. They were left with only their lives and the clothes they stood in.

Hearing the news, Pullayya immediately hurried to the spot that same night, and consoled Satyanarayana Pantulu saying that there was no need to worry or be afraid so long as he, Pullayya, was alive. Meanwhile the doctor also arrived and listening to what the others related, he sighed.

"Satyanarayana Pantulu, what do you gain by grieving over this? Your lives are saved, that is a great blessing. If one lives, one can earn ten such houses. Let's go to our house. Amma, please get up. Sufferings can be the lot of anyone. You can stay in my house for as long as you like. Why hesitate?"

"Don't worry, you can build a house in no time. Get up, Pantulu, get up," encouraged Pullayya.

Unable to reject the doctor's offer and Pullayya's advice, Satyanarayana Pantulu went to the doctor's house with his wife and children.

On the third day after Satyanarayana Pantulu's house had burned down, Kusalayya visited Pullayya's house. Pullayya lay back in an easy-chair, smoking a cheroot. Satyanarayana Pantulu sat in his usual place, writing up accounts.

"Come in, Kusalayya! We don't see you at all these days," said Pullayya on seeing him.

"Busy days. Aren't they? Been trying to call on you... just not possible," Kusalayya sat on the bare floor, away from the mat spread on it.

"Sit on the mat. Why on the bare floor? Have you eaten?"

"Oh yes, we can skip anything, but can we skip eating? By the way, Pantulu garu, the burning of your house. Was it accidental or done on purpose?"

"What can I say, Kusalayya? The fact is our karma destined it to happen."

"Adding to your troubles, within a month of your father's death, this thing... times don't seem to be good for you. Pantulu garu, you know everything. You took no action at all? Have you had some shanthi¹ performed?"

"How do I know that the days are not favourable for me?"

"Sir! You said so to shavukaru Mallayya. He told us on the pyol of the kutchery."

"Did I? Oh, yes, I remember now. I said it in some context. So, Mallayya garu remembers everything!"

"Oh yes, why won't he? He remembers everything important to him. Everything else is forgotten. That's the way of the rich."

"You are hinting at something. What is it?"

"Pantulu garu, how much money did I make that day selling hay and black-gram? Didn't I have the amount counted by you?" asked Kusallayya.

"Yes. Three hundred-rupee notes, eighteen fives and ten one-rupee notes. You took all the four hundred, saying you had to pay Mallayya."

"I poured the money into his hands. 'I don't have the keys with me. Come in the evening for your promissory note,' he said. Trusting him to be a gentleman, I came away. This morning I took twelve rupees as interest. When I asked for the return of the note, he said, 'When the principal is not paid how can the note be returned?' Mouth sealed, I returned. That's justice for you, Pantulu garu," ended Kusallayya.

"Has he really done such a thing?" asked Pullayya.

"No, I am telling a lie. I sold straw without caring if there was enough fodder for the cattle. I was suitably punished. Won't I be? Will their suffering go in vain? See what he is up to! Won't I live to see what happens to him? Won't my pain fell him one day? Will he grow rich with that four hundred? Isn't there a God above? He watches everything and everyone."

Kusalayya was unable to proceed. Satyanarayana Pantulu and Pullayya turned into statues of wood.

"Pullayya garu, whatever happened is past tense. I can be cheated once; but can I continue to be cheated all my life? I don't like it known that I owe Pullayya garu money. In fact, there is no greater folly than being in debt. Of course, you need money, I know. At least a thousand rupees to build a house for Pantulu garu. But do help me also to this extent. If you give me four hundred rupees, I will throw it in Mallayya's face. Don't give me a loan. I have a cow that has calved and a she-buffalo close to her time. I don't even have enough fodder for them. I will bring them now and leave them in your yard."

"What are you saying, Kusalayya? Are we all like Mallayya? I have no such fears. Take the four hundred. You may return it at your convenience. Keep the cow and the she-buffalo. If you say you'll leave them in the yard, I won't allow it. Array, Jaggai, ask mother and fetch four hundred," Pullayya shouted. Kusalayya stood up.

"Why are you getting up? Take the money."

"Pullayya garu, I don't need a loan. The great trust you have in me — that is enough."

Kusalayya prepared to go.

"Should you be so stubborn? Think a bit. Take the money. Repay me when the cow and buffalo are sold. It's all right with me. You need not even pay me interest."

"Say I can have the animal tied in your yard, and give me money. Otherwise I don't need it."

"All right, as you wish," he said and handed over the four currency notes Jaggarao had brought.

After his departure, Pullayya asked Satyanarayana Pantulu. "Why has Mallayya stooped to such a fraud?"

"That is what appears strange. So far as I know he has never done such things."

"I hear Mallayya and Chandrasekharam are very friendly these days?"

"I haven't heard or seen any signs of it."

"It's necessary that we know, Pantulu. Otherwise we may have to leave the village and become vagrants."

"I will try to find out."

Two days later Mallayya's hayrick, drawn from thirty acres was burnt down. Pullayya told Satyanarayana Pantulu, "They say that Mallayya garu thinks that this is Kusalayya's doing. Not merely does he think so, he has even said as much to one or two people. Hearing this, while Mallayya was still on the pyol, Kusalayya approached and proved that he wasn't in the village that day and that he had gone to visit his relatives. It seems he lashed out that no householder with children and cattle would do such a thing."

"No, no! Kusalayya has never been such a person. He is a god-fearing man. It's unbelievable that he would resort to such a wretched thing."

"That's what confuses me... hard to say what rascal has done this. No Pantulu, the whole village is getting out of control. You cannot blame anyone in particular. If we do, we won't be able to tell whose house they will burn and when. The days have come when we have to go in dread of our lives. Well, whatever is to happen, will happen."

"When dharma is absent, what else can we expect?" Satyanarayana Pantulu sighed.

FIFTEEN

Vasudeva Sastri opened the door at night and went out to relieve himself. On the pyol outside sat a man, his face covered. The doctor's heart started to thump. Calming himself a little, he inquired, "Who is it?"

"Doragaru¹, it is me Polai," Polayya stood up and the staff in his hands slipped down with a thud.

"When will you develop some commonsense?"

"Why do you abuse me doragaru? What wrong have I done?"

"How many times should I tell you not to address me so? Who is dora? Are you dependent on me for your livelihood? Am I maintaining you? You live with the labour of your hands. Each man has his own self-respect. If you call me 'dora' again, I won't give you even a drop of medicine. Do you understand?"

"It's a habit, babu. Will habits stop in a day?"

"Polayya!"

"What is it, babu?"

"Why are you standing? Come and sit down."

"I will sit here."

"All right, but you seem to have been sleeping here these last two days?"

"Yes, sir, I have been sleeping here."

"Then why couldn't you have asked for a mat?"

"The stone slabs of this pyol are cool. Moreover, I'd have to wake you up."

"Tell me the truth, Polayya: have you had a tiff with your wife? Or, have there been any quarrels in the Harijan quarter? Why have you been sleeping here when you haven't done so in the past? If it was the village you wanted to sleep in,

there are so many rich men's pyols."

Polayya was silent.

"Why don't you speak? Is someone in your Harijan quarter out for vengeance?"

"Against Polai? — Those rascals in the Harijan quarter — do they have such guts?" Polayya laughed mockingly.

"Then?"

"Ugly feelings are surfacing in the village. Every day one thing or another is set on fire. I felt that something would happen unexpectedly. So, I have been sleeping here, babu."

The doctor laughed aloud.

"Polayya, never again will one as crazy as you be born. What would anyone gain if my house were burnt down?"

"Babu garu, don't say that. What do they hope to gain by burning down houses and hayricks? They burned down the ashram, what have they gained? Anger and party feelings make them act, babu."

"I live by dispensing medicine. In what way am I connected with political parties? What will they gain by troubling me?"

"If you had such ideas, why would you live in this rotten village? Is everyone as good as you? People like you are so rare that ordinary men cannot recognise them. They think that the whole world eats grass as they do. It is for your own good sir, that..." he glanced at the window.

"Why do you hesitate? There's nothing to fear."

"Oh, it's nothing, but why do you keep that Satyanarayana Pantulu in your home, babu? You'd better send him away soon."

"What is this Polayya? They lost their house, they were in great distress. I asked them to stay here with me for a few days. Was that wrong? If it is, then living in the village itself is wrong. I cannot stand by and watch all this silently. Polayya, I can now understand. I won't ever forget your help. Don't misunderstand me, but go along and sleep in your own house. This place does not need a guard. How long can I live thus?"

"You don't need to worry... I know, and you say so. It's not just your house that will be burned. But all the medicines too... who would help us, poor folk? Because you gave my

wife some medicine the other day she is now able to cook some rice water for us. If she had died, what would have happened to all my children? Say what you will. Push me out by the neck, but I won't leave you alone at night."

"I tell you Polayya, go away."

"I won't. Not even if you cut my throat."

"Unless you do, I won't re-enter the house," Vasudeva Sastri sat down on the pyol.

Polayya continued to stand for another quarter of an hour. The doctor began dozing where he sat. "Babu, you seem to be more headstrong than I am," said Polayya. He called out to Satyanarayana Pantulu, "Doctor garu wants to sleep here! Outside! Please make a bed for him here." Despite of the doctor's protestations, Padma fetched the bedclothes and spread them there. At Polayya's instance, she bolted the door from the inside and went to bed.

They both passed the night on the pyol. At daybreak, Polayya slipped away quietly.

On opening the day's newspaper, the doctor found that his village was headline news. Curiosity made him read on:

The Secretary of the Harijan ashram, Mrs. Ammayamma garu, writes: Communists have been on the rampage, causing senseless damage in this village for the past ten days. Houses and hayricks have been... and probably will continue to be... torched. The ashram, striving for the upliftment of Harijans, has also come under their flames. We don't know how to label such acts. A rich man's house was attacked yesterday and the miscreants decamped with all the money in the house. To date, the village has suffered losses of about a lakh of rupees. An atmosphere of terror has gripped the villagers who face an uncertain future. Why the government is dragging its feet is not known. Immediate despatch of Malabar Police² to strengthen security measures would restore confidence among the people. It is hoped that the representative government would not fail to shoulder its responsibility.

The news amazed Vasudeva Sastri. Dispensing medicines quickly to those who had come for them, he went directly to the ashram. Ammayamma garu was in the office, writing. Seeing the doctor, she smiled at him and showed him to a chair. "I suppose you have lost your way and come here," she said.

"No, I have no time even to lose my way and wander about. I have come here as I have some work with you."

"Indeed? Had you sent word, I would surely have called on you."

"Are you free yourself? You must be very busy. Besides, the huts of the ashram have also gone."

"Yes, sir. Some ruffians burnt down two huts. There is no limit to their atrocities."

"Yes, yes."

"I have written about that also to the papers. Have you seen it?"

"That's why I am here."

"Really? Writing to the papers was good, wasn't it? I have sent a separate statement to the authorities."

"That was a good thing. You have rightly diagnosed the disease. It's a brilliant idea. The villagers will be eternally obligated to you."

86 Ammayamma garu's brain was no less than her body. Laughing, she said, "Oh, that's nothing, I wrote it as a bit of a service, like the squirrel's devotion³."

Seeing that his words had no more effect on her than rain on a buffalo, the doctor was filled with self-loathing.

"By the way, has the loss of property been as high as a lakh rupees? I was so preoccupied I had not noticed."

"Oh, not that much. Less than ten thousand. I wrote that just to create a stir."

"Whose house was attacked yesterday?"

Ammayamma garu grew pale. Then recovering quickly, she said angrily, "I don't have to answer you."

"No, no, I am asking just to know the facts. Please don't take me amiss. I haven't come to cross-examine you. Even if I do, you are not the one to talk. You said that communists were behind these crimes. Are they, really? Who are those communists? So far as I know there has not even been a second party in the village till recently. Perhaps engrossed in my medical practice, I have been unaware of the facts. Who are those communists?"

"Who do you think comprises Chandrasekharam's gang?"

"Is Chandrasekharam a communist? Who told you so? What proof do we have? Is he the cause of all the crimes in this village? Ammayamma garu, just think! He too went to prison for the sake of the country. To uplift the poor, he started a factory and has now become a pauper. Can he be a communist? If he had erred, our duty would be to admonish him. If he will not be advised, then he will have to face the consequences of his actions, nothing else. You haven't yet made any attempt in that direction. Without doing so you have branded him a communist.

Besides, in a village such as ours, if there are really wicked people, will patriots like you enjoy any public respect? Doesn't it amount to accepting our incompetence and saying, 'We are numbskulls. Please come and set things right'? Moreover, you have asked for the Malabar Police to be sent, but have you thought things through carefully? No, you haven't thought at all. You don't know what police zulum⁴ is. You haven't considered the hatred that their presence would kindle. You have done this only to safeguard your position. You haven't done this deliberately, you've done it unintentionally. Please send a correction of your statement to the papers. The elders of the village, you and I, will try to solve this problem. We should solve our own problems. Who are they to interfere in our matters? It's dishonourable to seek their help. Nor is it safe. So, send a correction to the papers this very day."

Ammayamma garu was silent.

"Everyone commits mistakes. To acknowledge them and set them right is the quality of the great. The rest is your will and pleasure. I have said this because it's my duty. I take leave of you," he said, and walked away briskly without waiting to hear her reply.

Ammayamma garu sat there transfixed, face flushed, like an angry village deity.

The day had declined. Ceasing their card-games near the rachchabanda and the library, flapping their uttariayms and stretching to shake off their languor, people moved homeward to attend to their duties. As Vasudeva Sastri was going to Chandrasekharam's house, he came across a group of students who went by in the opposite direction. They were a mixed lot and numbered about two hundred. Holding placards and flags they were shouting slogans. At first he could not understand what those slogans were for. Neither did he know that there was a meeting that day. So, wishing to know what it was all about, he stood waiting. Mallayya's son, Gangadharam, led the group, flag in hand and shouting himself hoarse.

"Down with traitors.

Down with goondaism¹

Long live the revolution

Long live democracy."

The others repeated the slogans in chorus. On seeing Pulayya's grandson Jaggarao also in the group, the doctor's mind filled with all kinds of thoughts. "What a pity! Children who should eat their fill and play without a care! Study without worry or anxiety! Why were they being turned into brutes and machines, their minds crippled? Was it any use blaming them? A nation shaped in such a manner — will it attain truth? Will it enjoy freedom? No, there could be no deliverance for this nation in the near future," he thought.

"Doctor garu, you should also come to the meeting at the temple," shouted Mallayya's son to him. After the students had passed by, Vasudeva Sastri went directly to Chandrasekharam's house. Two little children were playing in the sand in front of the house. Tousled, unkempt hair and ragged clothes — he wondered whether it was Chandrasekharam's

house. But, on looking more closely, he was sure that it was indeed Chandrasekharam's. "Is your father home?" he asked.

"Yes, please go in. Father, father, doctor garu has come for you," the girl shouted.

Chandrasekharam invited him in. "Please ... has doctor garu lost his way?" He showed him to a one-armed chair. Vasudeva Sastri wiping his face with a handkerchief, scrutinised Chandrasekharam from head to foot. He appeared thinner and darker. His hair had turned grey.

"Sir, why do you stare at me? I have grown a bit thin, that's all. This mill business and the forgery case — I have no peace of mind. Thanks to Pullayya, we lost the infant girl a few days ago."

"Oh! What did the child die of? Why didn't you even send for me?"

"I don't know what the trouble was. At that time I didn't even think of you. Still, what could you have done? You can only treat the diseased body. What medicine can you administer to a disease of the mind? Well, it's all over. No use thinking about it now."

Was Pullayya responsible for a baby's death too? thought the doctor.

Then he said, "Life is inevitably a mix of joys and sorrows. The wise have to adapt themselves. It's all right. Put on your uttariyam. Let's go out."

"Where to?" Chandrasekharam asked in surprise.

"When setting off on an important mission, such queries that hamper should not be asked. Get up."

"Shall I start without knowing where and for what purpose we are going? Good! I am very surprised that I might still be of some help."

Why should you be surprised? I want some help from you and no other. So, get started."

"Mocking me?"

"Have you ever heard of Vasudeva Sastri making fun of anyone? Don't you know me? Let's go to Pullayya garu just once. Get up."

"To Pullayya!" Chandrasekharam was astounded.

"Yes, that's where we are going."

Chandrasekharam immediately suspected that the doctor had come to mediate at Pullayya's behest. Pullayya must have sent the doctor, fearing that he would be punished if his guilt was proved in court. Otherwise, what need for mediation? He probably wanted to escape from the difficult situation, his dignity intact. Should I allow Pullayya's tricks to fool me? Am I, Chandrasekharam, to be treated so lightly.

"Doctor garu! You are greatly mistaken. I am under no compulsion to go to Pullayya. Had I erred, it would be in the fitness of things to beg his pardon, as you say. He is the scoundrel — not I — ruining my factory, my business, my property and my reputation."

"Look here, Chandrasekharam, listen carefully. You are educated and cultured. To some extent you have served the people — and probably will continue to do so, while you can. Just look at what has happened in a broad perspective. I am not accusing either you or Pullayya of any wrong. I am not acting on his behalf. In fact, he doesn't even know that I am here. I speak now only to explain the current situation. What would I gain by deceiving either of you? I'm an unattached person, am I not? What do I need for myself?"

"But naturally one may doubt why I should take all this trouble. If it concerned something else, I would not have come here. I'm here only because I believe that both of you would understand. Why should there be this misunderstanding between you and Pullayya and why should the village suffer? Does it make any sense? Property worth thousands — hayricks, institutions — being reduced to ashes. Are you, or is Pullayya garu, benefiting from this? No. In this process, the innocent and the poor are the losers. They are panic-stricken, uncertain of what lies in store for them. I don't mean to say that either you or Pullayya is responsible for all the atrocities. In fact, neither of you know anything about them. I know it, so do you both. Neither of you would permit such devilish deeds. Even now, they haven't ceased. How and why are they happening? Taking advantage of your dispute, some miscreants — no, some ignorant people — are perpetrating those

crimes. People like you should not create a space for such things to happen, nor would you. Besides, what is the use of such feuds except mutual harm? Does anyone gain? So, intelligent people like you should not hesitate to blot out thoughts of vengeance. It is true an error has been committed, no matter by whom. There is still time to set it right. Why shouldn't it be set right? If you haven't done anything wrong, you will have greater courage to set it right. Don't let complexes trouble you. Let's go to Pullayya. Let's ask him to forget the past. Would he refuse? Most probably not. If he does, we shall know the truth. Get up. Let us set forth."

"Should I ...?"

"Why are you still hesitating?"

"In that case, who will repay the five thousand to the Marwadi?"

This matter hadn't occurred to Vasudeva Sastri at all. Yes, who should repay that money? That was a real problem. He thought for a while.

"Why bother about who should pay? We shall ask Pullayya himself to pay the money."

"Should I beg him again, doctor garu? Impossible. Once is enough. He stood surety once and has destroyed me to this extent. I have been punished enough. I cannot forget these great gifts for many births to come. Should I now approach him again and beg him to repay the money? I cannot do it. It's wrong to suppose that I would let such a treacherous person go free. Now, even if he prostrates before me, after my family and I have been humiliated and have suffered greatly, compromise is impossible, absolutely impossible."

"Sekhar, listen to me. Think about what I've said. Consider my words, I may be your elder or not. Once you go to court, there will be no end to the telling of lies and creation of false evidence. Apart from that, the courts have only ears, no eyes. Judgement is passed on that false testimony. Why get embroiled in trouble? Listen to me. Either he or you will end up in prison. Why should either of you go to prison? Can't both of you live happily and freely? Don't let this chance slip by."

"Pullayya may think that he is rich and secure. But for him the pot of water and the food in the bowl of prison are inevitable. If fate has ordained it that way, what can we do, doctor garu?"

If one has not committed any mistake, one should pardon others magnanimously, but not behave in such a cruel way. Probably, Chandrasekharam has, after all, committed the forgery, Vasudeva Sastri suspected. But he felt helpless, and rose to go.

"Doctor garu, this is not a quarrel between the two of us. If it were, I would have somehow compromised. But no. This is a problem affecting thousands of workers. He has snatched the very food from their mouths."

"True; today, even if I get a stomach ache it is a social problem. If I get a disease and become an invalid, even that is a social problem. Unable to face individual problems by himself bravely, everyone attributes his ills to society, calling them social problems, claiming to have made personal sacrifices for society and inciting others. With these he is killing wisdom and playing the snake-charmer's pipe to passions," said Vasudeva Sastri.

"Though you provoke me greatly, I am not alone, as Pullayya garu thinks. To that extent I am fortunate."

Why should such a person be shown mercy? thought the doctor and replied: "Yes, I understand. I hear you have started the workers' union again and are haranguing them."

"If he holds hands with the rich to make the labourers weep, what should we do?"

Vasudeva Sastri left without hearing his reply. Setting aside one's doubts, when one tenders good advice, it is unpalatable to the listener, even when his life may be in danger. Is it surprising, then, that Vasudeva Sastri's words did not register in Chandrasekharam's mind?

After Vasudeva Sastri's departure, Chandrasekharam sat unmoving. The doctor's words resounded in his mind. He pondered if he had turned a personal problem into a social one, as Vasudeva Sastri had said. To overcome this feeling, his mind tried to find fault with the doctor. "Vasudeva Sastri is a

Brahmin. All Brahmins are betrayers of revolution. Keeping the varna system² intact they try to perpetuate their authority. So too must Vasudeva Sastri be." He would like to preserve the social structure to ensure its power. By opposing such a person, he was helping the revolution and not treading the wrong path. The rich were conspiring against him, Chandrasekharam, and trying to send him to prison only to exploit the labourers. He was being sacrificed for their avarice and atrocities. "Was there a more valiant deed than sacrificing for the sake of workers?" he thought. This sentiment wiped out the harm he had done to them in the past. He felt overwhelming compassion for them. They were his brothers and for their sake, he was ready to suffer any trial.

"So, Vasudeva Sastri also seems to be in collusion with the shavukarus! He too did not want the workers to enjoy a little leisure." Chandrasekharam bit his lips. Brahmins were always Brahmins. He should convey this to the workers. Pullayya might offer prayers to countless gods or gratify any number of Brahmins with feasts, he would not escape prison. Wasn't the first hearing just two days away?

SEVENTEEN

With lawlessness emerging in the village, Pullaya lost whatever hesitation and timidity he had once had. The house of his innocent clerk, Satyanarayana Pantulu, had been burnt to ashes. Kusalayya was like Dharmaraja¹ himself and lived by the sweat of his brow — They had made him waste four hundred rupees most unjustly. They had made him sell his cow which was the mainstay of his family and slandered him with the false charge of burning Mallayya's hayrick. Silence would lead to any number of further outrages. For such immoral deeds and for the village to regain its former stability, it was necessary for him to win this case. His victory would not be his alone. It would be a victory for the whole village, a victory

for dharma! On his winning alone depended peace and happiness for the villagers. This was in truth the people's case. His sacrifice was for the people, for society. If he lost the case, there would be no check on the atrocities committed by Mallayya and his party members. Whatever the cost, the case had to be won. Loss of property, loss of life, his family's woes — nothing mattered, he had to win the case. If he were defeated, would there be any refuge for the innocent?

These thoughts filled Pullayya with fresh enthusiasm. Mentally he began going over what they would ask in the court and in what manner he should answer. Forgetting that he was the complainant, he began framing answers defensively as if he were the accused. He readied the papers needed for the court, as well as the evidence. He approached Madhavayya's wife, and secured a deposition from her to the effect that her husband had never, at any time, told her that Pullayya had stood guarantor to Chandrasekharam with the Marwadi. When he read the deposition in the court, shavukaru Mallayya's face would grow pale. When Madhavayya's wife herself had made this deposition, Veerayya's evidence would not be worth a dammidi². This devil Mallayya must have instigated Veerayya. He must have paid him. These people do not want justice. They want my destruction and the ruin of my party. How wicked the world was!

Evening.

Pullayya walked towards his fields. Just as Jaggarao was pulling the toy rattle cart in the front yard, a jutka stopped at the door. Ramarao got out of the cart and asked the cart driver to carry his box to the terrace. Jaggarao left his toy and leapt into the house, shouting joyfully, "Uncle is here, Uncle is here." Though his mother yelled to him, "Take him this water to wash his feet!" he rushed back to his uncle, unheeding. Ramarao lifted him up in his arms, and took out his purse to pay the cart driver. Meanwhile Rangamma brought him water to wash his feet before entering the house. Jaggarao groped about in Ramarao's pocket and asked, "What you brought for me, babai³?"

"No, you shouldn't ask such things. Ask if your auntie's

well," his mother admonished him.

"Auntie the day before only went. She must be well, won't she? Why don't you say what you bring for me?"

"Chains and a whip," Ramarao said laughing.

"What they for?"

"You are growing naughtier. So, chains are for fastening the hands and the whip to give you a few stripes."

"No, no, I don't want them. Keep them yourself or keep them for tatayya."

"Jagga, what rude, reckless talk is this, in the presence of elders?" his mother chided him.

"Why he says I'll be put in chains? Let tatayya come, we'll see who will be in chains."

"Why would your grandfather want to chain me?"

"Because you ran away, you won't stay here. Won't they handcuff you?"

"Don't mind his blabber. Wash your feet," Rangamma told her brother-in-law, placed the vessel of water by him and went in.

"Get down, babu. Let us wash our feet."

"First tell me what you got for me."

"What should I say I have brought?"

"Whatever you brought."

"Not now, I will give you something later."

After Ramarao washed his feet, Jaggarao dragged him into the lane. Lakshmmamma set the cot down in the backyard, and made the bed, saying, "Sit down." She herself sat by the threshold.

"Why have you grown so thin? Haven't you been eating regularly and properly? You don't care when I tell you not to live in the town. You don't want to move from there. Can't you be content at home seated like a maharaja? What are all these troubles for?"

"What would happen to my studies?"

"Studies, nonsense! No jobs; nothing! Ruining home and health, isn't it?"

"Where is father?"

"Away in the field, perhaps."

Lakshmamma related to him the troubles the family was facing. She narrated how the whole village was blaming the old man for nothing, how the village was no longer as of old, and how they had burnt down Satyanarayana Pantulu's house. Just two days ago, she continued, a bull as splendid as a chariot had died suddenly without any illness. Ever since, the old man had been agitated and uneasy. The case was coming up for hearing the next day. Ramarao listened to her narration, responding with a throaty sound to show that he was listening.

Just then Pullayya came into the backyard. Seeing his son his heart sank, but he soon collected himself. Burning with anger, he walked towards the kitchen without greeting his son, shouting, "Ammayi! Water for my bath!" Then turning to his grandson, he asked, "When did he come?" Comprehending his father's mood Ramarao kept quiet. "You left and he come. Guess what babai brought for me," said Jaggarao.

"What can he bring for you and me — except trouble."

"Amma, what is throuble? Is it for eating or for playing?"

96 "So, you have begun again!" Lakshmamma spoke sharply to her husband, defending her son.

Father and son finished bathing and dining without exchanging a word. Jaggarao had already fallen asleep. Pullayya walked to the terraced room in the fore portion of the house and occupied a chair. As Lakshmamma and her daughter-in-law were eating in the kitchen, Ramarao went up to his father and stood before him. There was silence between them for some time. Then Pullayya said, "Do you need money? Tell Satayanarayana Pantulu tomorrow that you have my permission, and take the money."

Ramarao burned in fury. Was father trying to muzzle him with a bribe? Or did he think that Ramarao was a child who could be silenced with an offer of sweets?

"That will not be necessary."

On hearing his son's tone, Pullayya heart sank. He could not speak for a while. Then, recovering somewhat, he introduced the real issue on hand.

"What were those senseless things you wrote?"

"About Chandrasekharam? Nanna, the other day you told me that you were his guarantor. It was on the very day that our M.A. results were announced. I told you that I wanted to go to Madras to continue my studies. Advising me not to go, you told me this. If you have forgotten, do try to remember more clearly. You had also asked me not to mention this to mother. Those words still ring in my ears. Don't you remember them at least now?"

"How can I remember your dreams?" Pullayya laughed. Ramarao had expected his father to fly into a rage.... but this sober response took him by surprise. He was unable to reply immediately. The silence lengthened.

"Chandrasekharam garu is innocent. Why drag him to court unnecessarily? And why trouble yourself? Withdraw the case. That is best for both of you."

"They say the egg came to mock the chicken. Don't stick your head into affairs you don't understand. Attend to your studies."

"You will reap only sin. No good will come of this. Withdraw the case."

"And do we also stop eating and dressing from tomorrow because you say so? Is that what you mean?"

"Injustice and fraud are not food and clothes."

"So I am a great sinner, the emperor of devils. Is that your meaning? Who has instigated you?"

Ramarao trembled with rage.

"What do you mean?"

"So, you want to testify in court against your own father?"

"If the case is withdrawn, why would things go that far?"

Pullayya shot up from the chair and gnashing his teeth viciously, caught his son by his hair, shouting, "Go to town directly. Otherwise, do you know what will happen?" and shaking Ramarao violently, pushed him and glared at him fiercely.

Ramarao didn't flinch.

"Withdraw the case, Nanna."

"Chi! Even the act of glimpsing your face is a sin. Will you go away from here or not?" He suddenly raised the chair by his side.

Ramarao walked out as if in a trance. In the hall, Jaggarao's face as he lay smiling in his sleep appeared to be mocking him. If he did nothing, the court would sentence Chandrasekharam to prison. His wife and children would be orphaned and suffer a great deal. He would be responsible for all their miseries. Because of him an entire family would be ruined. Instead of doing good, he was deliberately harming them.

If he faltered at this hour, the rest of his life would be futile. If he acted, wouldn't his father treat him like a worm, in future? What should he do when his father was obstinate? Was there no way except testifying in favour of the other side? Ramarao thought that his father must somehow be made to withdraw the case. Whose words would father heed? Would he take anyone's advice? Supposing he told his mother? No one was more capable than she of convincing him. If she had something in mind, what would he do except obey her? Though in the beginning, he might abuse or beat her a little, finally he would be compelled to listen to her. That was all. Other than she, there was no one to advise him on the matter. Father was afraid of her. That was why he had told his son not to reveal the matter of the guarantee to her.

That might be so, but would mother believe him? If only she did, she would undoubtedly persuade father somehow. But the question was whether she would believe him. If even she didn't, he Ramarao, would be destined never to return home again. Never again would he enjoy her affection. But did that mean that he should shirk his duty? No, not at all. Death was better than such a vile life. How many would have the opportunity to sacrifice life, family name and finally fame for the sake of dharma? And draw bliss from the sacrifice? No. Such happiness was beyond the reach of petty creatures and those who lived only to eat. This was beyond their imagination. Such great fortune was going to be his. Why should he push it away? From whatever angle it was viewed, dharma was the goal in itself, not the result. Performing one's duty was all-important. His pleasure in performing his dharma would be enhanced at another level, if mother too did not believe him.

Mother lay sleeping in the hall. Ramarao did not want to wake his sister-in-law. He tip-toed towards the foot of the cot. He glanced at the cot of his vadina. Rhythmic, undistorted breathing came from that direction. His hands touched his mother's feet. Lakshmamma woke up with a start. When she saw her son's face, she sensed that there was something he wanted to say in confidence. She got up and went straight to the backyard. He followed her and stood by her side.

"What's the matter? Whatever has happened?" Mother asked anxiously.

Ramarao related the reason for his arrival, and also the conversation that had taken place between him and his father. On hearing those words, she felt the ground sinking under her feet, and everything around began to whirl. She asked him to help her back to her bed.

Ramarao was unable to speak. He led her to her bed and made her lie down. Then he rested on the bed spread for him.

Lakshmamma could not sleep a wink that night. Was her husband guilty of such injustice? Or was the son betraying his father? She simply could not decide. She could not imagine the truth. This problem which had cropped up was not between the father and son alone. If it was really so, she might have defended her son. But this was related to her family and Chandrasekharam's. Either her husband or Chandrasekharam had to go to prison. It was imperative that Chandrasekharam alone go to prison. Besides, her son would not benefit by interfering in this case. If he did not give evidence against his father, no one would grill him for his failure to do so. If he did, her husband had to be jailed. Would he send his father to prison? For what? For dharma? How would the rejection of one's parents fit the definition of dharma? Moreover, wasn't she the one responsible for filing a case against Chandrasekharam? If she had not been so firm in having a registered notice issued, mightn't her husband have kept quiet? If her husband had supported her then, could she betray him now? No, it could not happen. As the father had said, the son was deluded, had imagined things, dreamt them up. And he believed that that was the truth. There was nothing more to it.

People don't believe things they dislike. They consider them illusions: lies and figments of the imagination. And so it happened in Lakshamma's case. She decided that what her son had said was not the truth. In the early hours of the morning she got up, went to her son's cot, sat on it and stroking his hair, said, "Ramudu, truly you are mistaken. Whatever has happened is behind us. Leave home at once. Don't return for six months. Pay heed to an elder's words. If your father asks questions, I will explain. Now, go away."

"Are you too telling me to leave home?" he pushed his mother's hand away as she stroked his head.

Lakshamma suddenly got up from his bed and walked away.

"A blight on your sleep! Why don't you get up? It is quite light," she shouted sharply at her daughter-in-law and woke her up.

Ramarao pitied his mother. "How naive she is!" he thought.

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"Now, there! You are slipping again! You are faltering into affection, Ramu," his conscience warned him. "Out of the question! That'll never happen. I am not like the others. Whatever happens — even if the skies fall — Ramarao will not retreat — that's certain," he decided.

EIGHTEEN

NO wonder that shavukaru Mallayya, who was so watchful that he even marked whose roof a crow sat on, knew about Ramarao's arrival before anybody else. Why had Ramarao who had not been home for more than eighteen months, arrived so suddenly? Instead of arriving a month ago, why should he come now — particularly, when the trial was about to begin? Therefore, there had to be some link between his arrival and the hearing. What could that be? And how was he, Mallaya, to know for certain? He could try to find out from Satya-

narayana Pantulu, but he was a hard nut. Besides, the very attempt might have a counter effect and produce a negative result. Perhaps even Ishwara could not ferret out the mysteries of that house. That was why Pullayya was playing whatever games he liked, manipulating things the way he wanted.

That apart, why was Ramarao here? And how best could he get more information about this? To Mallayya, as he washed his face in the morning, this had become a knotty problem. However hard he thought about it, he could not get to the bottom of it. Suddenly, a unique way to harass Pullayya occurred to him, and the thought was like a windfall of a lakh of rupees: Ramarao could be used to torment Pullayya. Only thus could Pullayya be yoked and controlled. And without giving Pullayya such a drubbing, things could not be squared up. Wiping his face, Mallayya threw a fine towel over his shoulders and went to the Harijan ashram.

A labourer was working the ethamu¹. Ammayamma garu, her saree tucked in firmly about the waist, was preparing the furrows into which water would be channelled. Mallayya walked straight up to her.

"Annayya! A visit so early in the morning?" Her greeting was in the manner of an enquiry about his welfare.

"Oh! Nothing in particular, amma. While returning from the field, I thought I'd drop by here... the burning of the huts..."

Truth was indeed born after Mallaya.

"See those burnt stumps there? They burnt down those two huts."

"Which scoundrel is afflicted with the terminal disease, I wonder. Without considering the public service this institution renders, he has burnt it! Have you come upon any clues?"

"Don't talk of clues! Could have been worse. Everything — even the tiled hut would have been flattened if we hadn't been alert and if some children hadn't been present to save at least that."

"Will the stumps be useful?"

"No, come and take a look," she said and rinsing her hand in the stream of water, she took him to the place where the

huts had stood. Kicking the burnt stumps and looking at them, he said, "These are useless. You'll have to start from scratch. It is expensive to build a hut these days."

"This cart — the institution — continues to move forward because people like you are lending a helping hand. Otherwise, it's not easy," she responded.

"Can one or two people shoulder the burden that has to be shared by the whole village? Everyone has to help... for my part, I shall give you all the palmyra leaf thatches you'll need. Send the toddy tappers to our grove to fell them whenever you want it."

"Annayya, what else can I do if you instruct me? Rafters beams, poles and other things — won't they cost more than four thousand rupees? I can, of course, collect the amount if I go calling on the neighbouring villages. But I don't want to do that. The ashram is in our village. We built it. We should bear the whole burden, why should we beg others? What about the prestige of our village?"

"It would be good if one could contribute that much. Actually, I was thinking of donating a lakh of rupees. But where can I raise the amount?"

"You needn't give money. Donate ten toddy palms. I don't want to trouble you by making more demands."

"What should I do, if you put me in such an impossible situation? Truly, my very visit here was a mistake."

"Don't say that! It's all right because we know each other well. If anybody else were to hear this, what would they think?"

"Let them think what they like. I am leaving."

Mallaya started to go. To see him off Ammayamma garu followed him up to the gate. After taking a few paces, Mallaya began again. "All right, you rebuild the huts with great difficulty. What guarantee do we have that they won't do tomorrow what they did yesterday. Then who would you go to, to beg? One might give aid once or twice, but no one will donate continuously, will they?"

"That is what tears me apart. So long as these communists are allowed to go free they will be a dagger in the heart."

"Well, that's what I came here to say. Ramarao has come to the village. You know all about him, don't you?"

"Oh! Yes! A terrific character, I know him well."

"Some character! So far the village has been aflame with fire. Henceforth it will burn without fire."

"Do you think so?"

"What do you think? Perhaps you don't quite know everything about him. Push him down one hole, he pops out of ten others. If you can, first think of a way of sending him to jail. Otherwise, you and your ashram will remain as they are. What do you think he is writing in the papers? Isn't it about you and your ashram? If you can do something, do it today. It will be a service to you, me and the village."

"Oh, it's child's play. Actually, the police have been asking me about him for the past five or six months, but I have been silent. Why should I, hereafter? If I don't see him handed over before the day is out, don't call me by my name."

Mallayya felt pleased that the mission he had come on had concluded in his favour. At the same time, he was unhappy that toddy palms and palm fronds worth four hundred rupees had to be thrown at her. But at least it did not have to be paid as cash. It pleased him that his competence in handling people had made her consent to this, and not led to a demand for four or five thousand rupees.

For Ammayamma garu, the ashram was a necessity. Without it, life had no purpose. She had created the ashram because it was essential to her being. She imagined that some people benefited by it. She would do anything for the sake of the ashram. Now, if Mallayya's goal was achieved, she could get material from him worth four hundred rupees. Moreover, there was another aspect to the question. Heedless of their differences in age, the doctor had reproached her in such a fashion! It was necessary to let him know who she was and what she could do. Vasudeva Sastri had brought Sathyanarayana Pantulu to his house only to ingratiate himself with Pullayya. Why should Satyanarayana Pantulu alone be taken to Vasudeva Sastri's house? Hadn't many others lost their houses to the fire! Had he invited all those victims to stay with him?

Had he at least helped them? No, he had done just enough to ensure Pullayya's patronage. He too needed Pullayya's protection. When he went to Chandrasekharam to patch up, that man had put him neatly in his place. To take revenge for this humiliation, he was now fawning on Pullayya. If Pullayya's son was handed over to the police, the doctor would feel humiliated. That would stop for all time to come any more angry outbursts against her.

She thought further about the matter, examining it to see if she could derive greater benefit from it. She looked at it as a poet would a situation from which the greatest measure of "rasa²" could be squeezed. Making all the preparations to extract money from Pullayya also, she went directly to his house.

He was busy with arrangements for a journey.

"Going somewhere?" she asked and seated herself in a chair.

"The trial is to begin tomorrow, so I am about to leave."

Pullayya was a bit startled but without showing his feelings, asked, "Who said so?"

104 "This is a village and won't things get around?"

"Certainly they will. What business do you have with him?"

"Oh, nothing. Perhaps he came here a couple of days ago, I've just come to see him."

"You've come to see him? Rather strange."

"Why strange? Before our very eyes, your boy has become great. Whatever the reason, wouldn't it be better to have a darshan³ of him?"

"Whatever has he done?" the father asked overcome with anxiety.

"Babai, how do we know the secrets of the police?"

"I'm so confused. On the one hand you say he has become great and on the other you say, 'How do we know the secrets of the police?' It looks as though he has brought some calamity on our family."

"It would seem so."

"Staying in the town for the past year and a half and sucking our house dry, is this what he has done? Chi! He is a vile

fruit of my loins. He has become a pest to the family and the community. He's made me incapable of holding my head high in public. I won't permit such people to live in my house even for a moment. When will the police come? How good it would be if they did so immediately! Wouldn't I personally hand him over? If I let slip this opportunity, can he be caught again?"

"Perhaps they may come in the night—"

"That's good. Only it would have been all right if I had handed him over myself, but Ammayi⁴, perhaps you know, if I do this personally the old woman will weep endlessly. She will nag me till the end of my life. How can I bear all this at this age? So, I shall leave now. Moreover, the trial is to begin tomorrow. Ask the police to do their duty. What more can I do?"

Not even in a dream had Ammayamma garu imagined that Pullayya would personally be willing to turn his son over to the police. Why was he willing to do this? Perhaps, he did not understand the reason. Later, if he throttled her for not explaining the implication, what would she do?

"Do you know why the police are hunting for him?"

"What is there to know? Perhaps he joined the communists to do what he has been doing here. What a fate for the holy country, Bharath, the country Gandhiji was born in! If we take pity on them, we would be enveloped in sin. How can we watch silently when god, dharma, distinction between good and bad are ignored and when dacoities, thefts and murders are being carried out? No, there is no use. If I show him mercy because he is my son, tomorrow he will crush my throat with his foot. Ammayi, my sorrow — his fate, if they take him away — has vanished with this one word. Now you need not hesitate. Don't pity him because we are related by blood. They are turning violent only because of his support. Instead of doing terrible things outside prison, he will be safe inside it as a detainee. Let him stay there. Isn't it better? Tell me."

How good it would have been, if all parents in Bharathadesa were like this! Would there be so many problems? Wouldn't

the nation reach the highest point of glory! — thought Ammayamma garu. She felt immense respect for Pullayya.

"It would be good if they took him as a detainee. But, Babai, suppose he were implicated in some criminal case? What use would it be to regret it later?"

"You dirty bitch, so you want me to cough up money! Couldn't you have begged for it earlier? This parching of the throat could have been avoided. All right, you are asking for one reason and I am giving for another. You are here to swallow like the Panakalarayudu⁵. Though I give you money now, would I be Pullayya, if I don't make you vomit double the amount later?" he thought.

"Somehow adjust things with this five hundred rupees and see that he is taken only as a detainee, without being implicated in any criminal case."

"Money has lost its value these days. I am worried whether this goal can be achieved."

"When our thoughts have become lax, all values are lost. All right, somehow send him away before I return. I leave the rest to you."

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Grabbing the five hundred rupees, Ammayamma garu went away. As soon as she left, Rangamma who never opposed him or appeared in his presence cried, "Maamayya," trying to stifle her sobs.

Pullayya was aghast. He was unable to speak.

"Have you by any chance been listening to everything from behind the wall?"

Rangamma nodded.

"All right then, why wait any longer? Start weeping and while you're about it, gather people from the street and village. No, this is no way to behave. As the daughter-in-law of the house, when else should you weep but on such an occasion? What would onlookers think? You voice the raga⁶ and your mother-in-law will provide the sruti⁷; or, to your sruti your mother-in-law will sing the raga. This is in order, isn't it?" Rangamma was upset by these words. And her father-in-law's behaviour was so odd. Still, spurred by affection for her brother-in-law, she implored him, "Maamayya!"

"That's why a woman in charge means rule by the tam-balas⁸. Ammayyi, what exactly are you trying to say? Isn't Ramarao my son? Can there be a parent who has no affection for his child? Have you no affection for Jaggarao? Then, what is it you want to say? You don't want Ramarao to be handed over to the police? Do you think I don't know that? Don't get flustered unnecessarily. Watch what is happening and keep silent. Don't tell your mother-in-law, do you hear?"

Carrying a little box and his walking stick, Pullayya left the house leaving behind a perplexed Rangamma. She could not understand why her father-in-law was doing such a thing. Should her brother-in-law be handed over to the police, as he said, calmly, without saying anything? What possible mystery could there be in all this? Supposing there was some secret, why wouldn't he tell her? Was it a lack of confidence in her? He had given so much money into her safe keeping! Was it possible, then, to say that he mistrusted her? She could not decide one way or the other. She could not bear the thought of handing her brother-in-law over to the police. Calling her son, she said, "Fetch your babai here immediately, wherever he is! Tell him that I want him to come here urgently. Do you understand? Come back quickly!" She sent him away. The boy searched for Ramarao and finally brought him from the terrace.

"Why have you asked me to come?"

"Abbayi, you must go away from here immediately."

"So you too say the same thing!"

"Oh! Not that it hurts us to have you here. You have been away for about two years and have only now returned. Even Jaggarao adores you. In these circumstances if I ask you to leave, it is only for your good. If you delay even for a second, how can I be sure that we'll ever see you again?"

"Just a moment ago, I overheard Maamayya and Ammayamma garu talking about it. The police are coming for you today. Before he left, Mammya asked Ammayamma garu to hand you over to them. Babu, what is this? I simply cannot understand. You had better leave immediately."

"Is father himself handing me over to the police?"

"Yes, that's what I don't understand."

"He has stooped so low!"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. He needs my absence! That's why he is getting rid of me. There can be nothing beyond this."

"You say something and Maamayya something else. I am unable to understand what the real matter is."

"Forgive me, it's horrible that I cannot show you even half the trust you have in me. But what can I do? There is no use saying it now. All right, I have to decide quickly about myself. When I come back, I will tell you everything."

Ramarao rushed to the doctor's house. The only person in the village he was close to was the doctor. The affinity was mutual.

"Doctor sab⁹! Doctor sab!"

Having attended to all those who had come seeking medication, Vasudeva Sastri sat resting in a chair. On hearing the call, he responded, "Who is it?" Getting up and seeing Ramarao he said, "You? When did you come? Sit here," and pointed him to a chair by his side.

"I arrived last night. I want your help."

"What is it?"

"The police are coming for me today."

"You? Why? Are they mad?"

"They are going to take me in for being a communist. You should somehow stop them from taking me away."

"Very strange! Are you a communist? How did they come to that conclusion?"

"My father and Ammayamma garu are announcing it. So can there be any doubt? If my detention is stayed for at least ten or fifteen days, thereafter I am prepared even to go to the Andamans¹⁰, if they send me."

"Will you go because they are not sending you to the Andamans now?"

"Never mind that, for now find a way to stop them from taking me in."

"If they seize you, it shall be my responsibility to get you released after a fortnight."

"That means you cannot stop them now."

"Don't you know how these things are? To prevent them from doing their duty, we'll have to use some illegal strategy. Or we need a recommendation, or we have to bribe them. Are you willing to adopt such methods? If you are, then I can't say that I wouldn't do it. But I'll have to think about it."

"Is that it? Should the lives of some people be destroyed unjustly? Is this all a waste — this snapping of the guts. Upon reflection, doctor garu, it looks as though there is something beyond human endeavour called fate."

"If you mourn and complain without telling me the real matter, what's the use?"

"You will understand by and by. It won't be appropriate to mention it now. I shall eat first and tell the police to come to you when they arrive in the village. You will be here, won't you?" Ramarao asked before going home.

"He seems to be caught in some current," thought the doctor pityingly.

NINETEEN

The poets of the past used words that were not entirely meaningful as fillers, either at the end of the line or in the gaps of a poem's structure, just to adhere to the rules of prosody. Likewise today's politicians when unable to solve social problems, administer ordinances, make arrests, order lathi charges, and arrange judicial custody. In both prosody and politics these are expressions of incompetence: from an aesthetic point of view the first, and from law of life the second are reprehensible. The wise find both intolerable but the latter is more disgusting because escape from the former is possible. If we don't like a book we can toss it away. The latter is different. To try and get rid of a distasteful government is nothing short of fatal. It may appear that unpopular governments can be dislodged in democratic countries. But an examination of recent history

proves how illusory the possibility is.

As expected, the police came for Ramarao. He was at the doctor's house at that time. If he went home, wailing and beating of breasts would begin. Why trigger such a fuss? He told the doctor that he would leave for jail immediately if his box could be fetched from his house. The doctor sent Satyanarayana Pantulu's eldest son for the trunk. The police hurried Ramarao into their van. Ramarao said nothing. The doctor too couldn't think of anything to ask Ramarao. Just as the van was about to start, "What do you want me to tell your father?" he asked.

"What is there to say? Tell him that this time either an MLA's seat or the District Board¹ President's position is his for sure," replied Ramarao without the least tremor in his voice. The doctor was surprised. The van dashed forward raising dust.

110 Until the police left the doctor's spirits were high. But when the van drove off, the world around seemed utterly desolate. He could not understand why he suddenly felt so acutely depressed. In that dejected state of mind he strayed into the dark village streets. After roaming about for some time, he reached the boundaries of the village, where the questions occurred to him, first, why he had set off and, second, where he was going? Immediately, he turned back and came home by which time the village lay plunged in deep slumber. Polayya who usually sat every night on the pyol of his house, covered with a blanket, was missing. "Why hasn't he come? He is not a shirker. Has he too been whisked away by the police? Perhaps not. Perhaps he had some trouble at home. Let me take a look perhaps he is asleep, exhausted. I would be disturbing him needlessly. No, he might have noticed that all the village eminents have left for town. Assuming that there would be no further trouble, he has not come."

Then he noticed the bed spread on the pyol. How was one to go to sleep without first washing one's feet? He would have to wake the sleeping. Why trouble them? He thought and sat on the bed when he spied a silver vessel filled with water between the pillow and the wall, placed in such a way that

only he would notice it. This attention to his needs made him inexplicably happy. Washing his feet, he had a drink of water and lay down on his bed.

The moon drifted rather dimly in the sky. As the clouds gathered, the stars disappeared. A metaphor for his own life. What had he done all these years? He had studied medicine, been jailed, desisted from remarrying and was now dispensing medicine. What was all this toil for? Had he endured so many tribulations only to establish this kind of government and such a society? With such governments in place, what scope was there for him to mind his own business? Hadn't they carried off the innocent Ramarao? What had he done? Morality, discipline and social progress — hadn't he served only these causes? Those who had carried away Ramarao, would they take him, Vasudeva Sastri, too? But it was difficult to arrest him. He was a political victim. All those in power had been his comrades. Moreover, didn't there have to be some reason to take him away? What reason would they show?

"Poor doctor babu! You are truly deluded! Your horns haven't tired². Tell us how many votes you have in your control? Or how much money you have? If there were people ready to obey you, why is there so much anarchy in this village? The fact is that not a single poor fool will obey you. If you were married, you would have had at least your wife's vote to contribute. Being a bastard of a bachelor, you don't have even that. And the less said about money, the better. If all your medicine bottles are sold, how much do you think you will get?"

"It that all? What about my self-esteem?"

"What esteem do you mean? When Ramarao implored you to stop his detention for at least ten days, what could you do? You know he is good and blameless. You knew that he could be surrendered to the police after a fortnight as promised. Yet you stood by passively, unable to act. If you are really that capable, it's not too late to try and get him released. Doctor babu, what is this self deception for? You can do nothing. There is no one less competent than you. What are your

dharma and ideals good for? They are worthless things. Make money through power if you can, or get power with money. Only then can your life be fulfilled. There is no other way but this!"

"Is that all? Is there no spiritual satisfaction in carrying on my profession? No fulfilment? It's a gross mistake. If a life is saved, a chronic disease healed, is there no nobility or joy in it? What do you say? Will the rich be able to attain this kind of authority? No, not all, not possible at all."

"Doctor sab, is this a sincere confession? Tell me how many viselu³ of joy you have experienced all these days? Those you see around you — the narrow-minded, the wretched, and the unbearable days passing by without change — they fill you with joy, don't they? The daily cases that you attend to — headache, stomach ache, cough, fever, diarrhoea, is there anything else? In your innermost self don't you worry about when you will escape from this infernal pit? Why do you deceive yourself?"

"You idiot."

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"So what I said is true! Otherwise why should you get so angry?"

The doctor yawned and turned on his side — what was that touching him? It was soft. Nothing at all. He was dreaming. No, it was not a dream, the breath on his cheeks... his chest felt constricted.

After dozing for some time, he came awake. He was fully conscious. What — was all this? Was it true? Cha, no it was a trick of the imagination. What he thought he had touched and experienced — was all illusory. A mere dream. That was all. But a woman! Moreover, would his wife have done that? Impossible! Really, he had been dreaming. Truly, Freudian analysis was applicable. There was no doubt that she was beautiful. Because of his friendship with her, he had blocked out the very fact that she was beautiful. That suppressed desire had been fulfilled in a dream.

But then, yesterday, Satyanarayana Pantulu should have been referred to. Perhaps there had been such a reference also. Therefore, it had only been a dream, nothing more. She was

not such a woman; neither was he such a man. But what about Pantulu's debility? He seemed to have heard about this very distinctly from her. But if it had been a dream how could he have heard it? So, it was suspected. Why shouldn't it be a figment of his own imagination? If it were, that man should not be suffering from that weakness. If he was indeed affected, it was not a dream. How could he say definitely that it had not been a dream? What law separated events in dreams and situations in real life from being coincidental. However, if Pantulu was truly impotent, suspicions were natural and had to be examined. Anyway, things would soon be clear. He fell asleep again.

The sun rose. The doctor who actually got up early, was still sleeping when Padma came to clean the pyol.

"Aray⁴ abbayi⁵! Ask doctor garu to wake up. It's getting late"

As she said this, he woke up and looked around drowsily. "Perhaps doctor garu did not sleep well. Take his bedding inside and spread it there."

The boy took the mattress inside. The doctor glanced at Padma. She stood behind the door, partly hidden behind it, her head bowed. Lazily he went in and lay down. He was gradually coming awake, but was unwilling to get up. He lay there, covering himself with the sheet.

The clock struck eight. When some four or five people came seeking treatment, Satyanarayana Pantulu's elder son told them, "Doctor garu seems to be unwell, he hasn't woken up. Come in the evening," and sent them away. Vasudeva Sastri could hear those words but he lay without moving. "Coffee is nearly ready, tell him to get up and wash his face," Padma told her son.

"I have to go to school early today, give me something to eat," said the boy.

"Wake up the doctor garu, I will serve you in the meanwhile."

Doctor garu, you have to get up. Otherwise it doesn't look like my mother will give me breakfast," the boy told the doctor and went in.

Vasudeva Sastri, having washed his face, sat in a chair,

staring at the steaming cup of coffee on the table nearby. The boy ate, and came in carrying his books.

"What is it, doctor garu, why are you looking at the cup that way?"

"Nothing! I was wondering whether this is the same cup I saw in the dream last night."

"What is that?" asked Padma who had just come to the door.

"A coffee cup seems to have appeared to doctor garu in a dream last night."

"What if it did?"

"Doctor garu is wondering whether this cup is the same one. It was in the cupboard all night, so how could it appear in your dream?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I was thinking."

"Stop being clever. Now go to school."

"Just a moment! What kind of cup did you see?"

"It was nice, shapely and warm. It was filled with coffee. It brought that coffee directly to my mouth and insisted, 'Will you drink or not.'"

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"Funny. When it came to you, what did you do?"

"I said, 'Go away! Don't come here. Someone has preserved you carefully. Rejecting him, why do you come to me?' and pushed it away."

"If you did, didn't the cup fall and break?"

"No, the more I pushed it away, the more insistently it urged itself on me. Angry, I threw it down and thrashed it again and again. Though I beat it, it didn't leave me. It made me drink all that coffee."

"It was only coffee. Why worry so much about having drunk it?"

"Coffee and homeopathy don't agree. How could I drink it?"

"Don't they agree even in a dream?"

"Not at all."

"Now run off to school," Padma scolded him "If they don't agree, he will take an antidote." The boy ran off to his school.

"I am undecided whether or not it was a dream." the

doctor said, looking at her closely.

"How do *I* know whether *you* had a dream?" she glanced sharply at him and left the place.

The doctor was shocked by her glance. After some time, feeling as if a hot oven had been lifted from his chest, he sighed. Taking the coffee cup at his elbow into his hands, and sipping it, he concluded, "Yes, a dream, only a dream."

TWENTY

At precisely nine o'clock that day Pullayya left for the court. The evening before, he had recited before the advocate everything he was to say. He was no longer worried. But he grew increasingly anxious about the commencement of the trial.

This wasted corpse of a Mallayya has landed here! Isn't this *my* case? But he has turned up earlier than me. As if visiting jails runs in the family! Vultures atop trees in graveyards, waiting for carcasses to be thrown out, are better than such people.

"What is it Maama! You are in such a hurry! Is it to the court?"

Look at him — how dare he greet me! Isn't that a smile of pure venom? What else could it be, when all of him is poison? Casting off shame, modesty and self-respect! "When did you come?"

"Just this morning. I found I was short of horse-gram for the bullocks and came here to buy it. Upon arriving, I learnt that your case is posted for hearing. I thought, well, anyway since one is present, one could attend the hearing before returning home."

"All right! Let's go and have coffee."

"I have just had some."

"It doesn't matter. Drop your stiffness and come on! If I don't offer due courtesies to you, our son-in-law, won't you tom-tom it in the village?"

Holding Mallayya by the hand, Pullayya took him to the hotel nearby and ordered pesaratlu¹. Mallayya noticed a zest in the old man's face. Unless his mind is shaken up a bit, he won't falter in court. How best can I upset him? Mallayya began thinking with the speed of an arrow.

"Well, Maama, have you heard this? Oh, you must have! Yesterday and today many people came from the village." Mallayya started playing the role of Salya the charioteer².

"What? What has happened between yesterday and today? I know nothing about it. Has anyone's house been set on fire?"

"So you don't know! Yesterday the police took your entirely unprepared son into custody when he was at the doctor's house. They didn't even allow him to get his clothes. The doctor it seems sent Satyanarayana Pantulu's son to fetch Ramarao's box. They just pushed him into the car and rushed away. Rice wasn't cooked in your house last night. Your grandson, I hear, wailed continuously, 'Babayi, Babayi.' Then, no need to say anything about my atta. I don't know if she even got up in the morning."

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The pesaratlu arrived. Pullaya didn't utter a word. Mallayya drew a plate towards him. Breaking off pieces of pesaratlu with his fingers and popping them in his mouth, he said, "The ways of the police are totally unjust, Maama. What should we say when they have picked up Ramarao? Is he the kind to meddle in others affairs or something? Forever lost in his books, he minded his own business. Doctor garu says that a good and well-read young man such as Ramarao doesn't exist in any of the villages around. What wrong could he possibly have done? Has he set fire to houses and hayricks? Those who have done these things are moving about like maharajas. The police can't touch them but seize only those that have no voice at all. Maama, what guarantee is there that they won't take us away tomorrow?"

"That's his karma. How can everyone's karma be the same? Even if they take us all in, what would they do with us? No, I have been beating my head from the beginning, 'Such actions do not suit people like us, why fell a tree to have it

collapse on you? Lie low and keep calm and no one will bother you.' But did he heed my words? He was trapped by his own actions. The effects of what one does will flow to one, as God sees all. What can we do?"

"How can you speak so Maama! You too... even if you disown him, isn't he your son? Can you break those bonds?"

"If he is my son, why would he act thus? It's all an illusion. He is neither my son nor I his father. If he's really my son, why should he join the communists who set fire to houses, looted and slayed people? And bring infamy to the family and nation?"

"Oh, they're all mere acts of immaturity. If through sheer ignorance he has done something and you too get angry with him, as the officers have done, what will happen to him? You have to convince them and somehow cover up for him."

"Cover up! Never! Impossible! How can I approach the leaders? If they ask, 'Have you too comes as a supplicant?' How can I live? Let him suffer what he deserves. If we still owe him something, he will return. Otherwise, this is the end. What did I do when God snatched away my elder son who grew as tall as a tree and was about to be my support? I will view this in the same way. What else can I do? The will of the Divine must prevail, what can man do?"

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Having finished their coffee, both men walked towards the court. He is merely pretending to be resigned to the situation. You fool! I handed him over to the police. What! Do you think that it was your power or ability? Was Pullayya jeering at him? How would anyone know that I am behind Ramarao's detention? Impossible. No one would know nor could there be any suspicion. Cha! I'm nervous at the sight of my own shadow. If this old man is so easy to manipulate, can he gradually control the whole village? Well-well... won't he make a false move some time or the other? Mallayya pondered as he followed Pullayya.

'Maama! Look! There! Your rival Chandrasekharam. All his cotton is sold. His face is haggard, his back bent. You are giving him a taste of the old man's power.'

"What have I done? Isn't Ishwara above and dharma below?"

One's injustice rebounds on oneself. There is little that we can do on our own."

Pullayya walked silently into the court verandah and sat down. Ammayamma garu also materialized there. "Chandrasekharam is entirely to blame. So he cannot escape conviction. Then how can his family be helped?" She kept thinking. Oh, she had a compassionate heart. Wasn't it why she ran the ashram? If such people could not be helped, what was the ashram for? Indeed why had Chandrasekharam done such a wrong thing? As for his father, hadn't he amassed wealth, cheating others? Hadn't the son inherited those bad traits? What else? Even so, she felt she should somehow help his family. But how? The best way was to adopt one of the children. Suppose that child inherited his father's qualities? But this notion didn't occur to Ammayamma garu at all. She was not at fault, after all. We try to forget the things we don't like.

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Meanwhile the court summoned Pullayya. Chandrasekharam, Ammayamma garu and Mallayya went in. Pullayya's heart throbbed wildly, as he had to utter the unvarnished lie that he had at no time signed for Chandrasekharam as surety on any matter. "Even now, it's not too late. You are a man with children. Why act so unjustly? Turn back at least now. No one here knows you. Save dharma, save justice and your reputation. Don't plunge your village into chaos. Why invite curses? Life should be lived wholesome and well, even if it is only for a few days. No one lingers on earth for ever. At heart you are really a good man. Never having harmed anyone till now, why fall into the hellish pit in your old age? Look, your leg is holding you back! You are not as cruel as some of the others in the village. If you do this now, what difference would there be between you and Mallayya? Yes, the five thousand is your hard earned money. Who can deny it? But its time came and it was lost. How many five thousands haven't you flung away in business? Pullayya! It is not too late! Step back," his conscience wailed.

"So you have robbed the choultry of its property? You have set fire to Mallayya's hayrick? You have destroyed Chandrasekharam's mill?" his mind heckled him and instantly he

felt so angry that he longed to kill Chandrasekharam with his bare hands. "Wait, wait, it's not over yet. Smearing your floor with cowdung won't make a festival³," thought he and went into the court. He saw the judge's face. "God knows how many bribes he must have accepted to strike down vital cases!" he thought and began counting the number of such incidents he had heard about. Upon seeing the lawyer for the defense, Pullayya's fear fell away. He stepped into the witness box, took the oath and prepared to be examined.

"Chandrasekharam say you signed on the Marwadi's IOU in the hotel on his behalf, as surety. Is this true?" The lawyer for the defence asked him.

"I have not signed for him on any promissory note."

Chandrasekharam gnashed his teeth in anger.

The lawyer took out a piece of paper from his clerk. Holding it before him, he said, "Look at this paper. Isn't this your signature? You have probably forgotten. Try to remember."

"I don't need to look at it. I know what I have done," saying which he flung the paper on the table next to him.

"By the way, how old are you?"

"Not too old to remarry and have children."

"No need to refer to that now. Did Chandrasekharam ever ask you to be his guarantor?"

"Many have asked me to be their guarantor. How can I remember all their names?"

As Pullayya stepped down from the witness box, he heard Chandrasekharam's derisive laughter. "Jiggling high spiritedly eh? The dog days are still ahead," Pullayya thought as he sat down. Next Veeraya deposed. He told the court that he had been in Madhavayya's service and went on to say that Madhavayya had told him that Pullayya garu had signed on the promissory note. Pullayya took a piece of paper from his pocket and passed it on to his advocate. He looked at it and said, "Six months before the date of the impugned document, you left Madhavayya's service after receiving your dues. Also you came back to the village a year after his death. Here's an affidavit from Madhavayya garu's wife. What is your answer to this?"

"Now do you see how I can strike?" said Pullayya's expression as he glanced at Mallayya, whose face shrivelled. Veerayya couldn't utter another word. He stepped down from the witness box and left the building. The case was adjourned.

As Pullayya was leaving the court, Chandrasekharam barred his way. "Smearing the floor won't make a festival. Wait! If I don't send you to jail, my name is not Chandrasekharam," he said gnashing his teeth. Then, one word led to another and they nearly fell upon one another. Those around him dragged Chandrasekharam away. Stroking his moustache and smiling, Pullayya moved away.

TWENTY-ONE

Pitch-black darkness. The chirping of crickets. A star twinkled here and there. It was like the country's moral scene. Rachchabanda, kacheri chavadi and the pyols of the library looked like the homes of indigent farmers that grain procurement officers had just visited. Dogs whined. Their sound — the low groans of starved creatures. Tillikal¹ shone with a rare gleam like the wise in a society plunged in ignorance. The pervading gloom was like the blind darkness of an unknown future.

Voices in low tones were heard in the backyard of Pullayya's house.

"Chi! That dirty dog is howling in front of the house. Chase it away," Subbadu said to his wife.

"It'll go by itself," replied Rami.

"A human being mustn't be so afraid."

"Go and chase it, will you, if you're not afraid!"

"When Pedda Dora passed away they howled like this²."

"How do they sense before we do that life is about to fade?"

"It seems they see Yama's men³."

"Why can't we see them?"

"You crazy woman! How will they appear to sinners like us?"

"Lachamma is a good-hearted woman, though occasionally she shouts and screams."

"Who can tell? No hope she will pull through. Pity Pullayya garu! What can we say? In the grip of so many whirlpools at the same time. The bull, it died suddenly, case in court, the police seizing his son that way! Poor woman, half these worries are enough to make her ill," she continued.

"Pity, not fated to enjoy even the sight of her children. At least if her daughter was with her, things would be better."

"The master, it seems, has sent her a telegram this morning. She will come tomorrow or the day after. We should speak fairly what we know. Rangamma garu is doing everything in the house. What more can a daughter do? Abbabba⁴, that wretched dog! Go and beat it, for goodness' sake. I too shall come with you."

"No need," Subbadu took a staff and walked out.

"Be careful! Poles to tether cattle line the way. I can't save you, if you fall and injure yourself," Rami warned him.

Subbadu went out, chased the dog away and returned.

"Something's moving on the terrace, perhaps a ghost."

"Ammo! Really a ghost. Then I won't sleep here. I'll sleep there itself."

"You mad creature. How can you be so full of fear! There is no ghost, no deity! Don't trouble me to death."

What Subbadu had seen was Pullayya, pacing about on the verandah anxiously.

Meanwhile the doctor came out.

"How is she?" Pullayya asked with concern.

"Except for the marked fever, there are no bad symptoms, don't worry."

"There is no danger, is there?"

"No, I assure you, don't be perturbed unnecessarily. Go to sleep. I have given the necessary medicine to your daughter-in-law. All right then, shall I go?"

"It is your kindness and God's grace."

"Look! You are getting agitated again!"

"The sudden onset, a severe attack, vomiting of blood, delirium — I was terribly disturbed. But you say she is all right?"

"Pullayya garu, don't you have faith in me? It's only your anxiety that makes you so pessimistic but there is nothing to worry. Don't allow Jaggadu to go into the room. Well, I'll come again in the morning to see her, of course."

"Oray, Subbadu! Carry the doctor's medicine chest to his home."

"No need to disturb his sleep," said Sastri.

The doctor left and Pullayya continued pacing on the verandah, hands locked behind him.

"Maamayya, she is blabbering again deliriously," his daughter-in-law informed him.

"Don't worry. Even doctor garu said she would. Do go to sleep. How long will you stay awake? Now don't spoil your health also unnecessarily," he sent her away. His conscience still gnawed at him. He had unjustly foisted a case on Chandrasekharam. Would that go in vain? That wrong had rebounded on him. Otherwise, his bull wouldn't have died. The police wouldn't have taken his son away. And his wife wouldn't have suffered this sudden, critical attack of illness.

122 We can deceive man but can God be cheated? He is ever alert and all-seeing. If his wife died, what would his fate be? What would happen to his son and daughter? The family had come to their present state only because of her support. If she passed away, wouldn't everything be ruined? Domestic bliss depended on her survival. If this peril passed them by and God gave her life, he vowed to Lord Ventakeswara of Tirupathi to perform niluvu dopidi⁵.

He and his family would have lived very happily, if they hadn't been involved in this wretched case. How easy their conscience would have been. Being a guarantor to that wretch had brought him so much unnecessary trouble. Perhaps his wife would die. The thought shook him badly. He was afraid even to imagine such a situation. If only this trouble would pass! But how would it? He could see no way out.

The very day after the trial began, Chandrasekharam's wife Lalitha woke up early in the morning, feeling sore all over. She had no maid to assist her and the fatigue of the previous day's work hadn't worn off yet. Her eyelids drooped drowsily, and the whole night the children had been weeping, to say nothing of him muttering continuously in his sleep. Gathering her strength, she rose slowly and raised the wick of the lantern. In its light Chandrasekharam's face looked haggard, ghastly. Perhaps nightmares were still haunting him! She gazed pityingly at him. His moustache was flecked with grey. In whatever perverse moment this wretched case had come upon him, it was crushing and squeezing him dry. A glowing, fair-skinned man was now as dark as a corpse. Why should this happen to her if it was not her karma¹? Why should her family, as delectable as a ripe fruit, suffer such a fate? Had there been any drinking or gambling or wanton conduct? What vile habit had brought this upon them? Just the lines on her forehead²! Carrying the lantern, she went into the kitchen knowing that Chandrasekharam would be pleased if coffee was served even as he woke up. She lit the fire in the kitchen. But soon she heard a yell from him, calling her. "Doesn't he know that he will rouse the children with such a shout? Why does he let out such a war cry?" she thought and walked into the hall.

"Look here, do you know why Veerayya volunteered to testify without our asking him?"

"Why?" she asked. She did not understand that he was talking about the trial.

"Do you know why he testified? It was clear that it was false testimony."

"Then why did he give it?"

"Pullayya must have bribed him. Mallayya and Pullayya have colluded."

"Mallayya is holding hands with him in something so deceitful?"

"What do you think? A cheat pretending to be upright but preparing to cut the throat. He has arranged this. Pretending to be on my side he has perpetrated this. He has manipulated things so that Veerayya's evidence has actually strengthened suspicion against me, damaging my case."

"Is all this true?"

"Is there still room for doubt?"

"How wicked can people get!" Saying that she would return soon, she walked into the backyard and returned in a few minutes with a cup of coffee. There was a film of perspiration on her face. Her hand shook slightly spilling the coffee into the saucer. Chandrasekharam didn't notice it at all.

"My heart almost stopped... the thumping has just ceased," she said.

"What happened?"

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"When I opened the door to the backyard, a black shape loomed and I almost died of shock. On looking again, I saw it was Ellamanda. Last evening I told him, 'He is not at home, he'll be here in the morning!' He has probably not moved from that spot since then. No matter what I say he will not leave. He says he doesn't want to go without seeing you."

"Ramachandra³! I haven't even woken up properly. Yet, where has this Saneshwara⁴ come from? Can't you send him away somehow?" he said looking at his wife helplessly.

Ellamanda had laboured as a coolie and somehow saved four hundred rupees by the time he was fifty-four. For four years a victim of malarial attacks, he was bed-ridden and drained of strength and stamina. His wife too was a brazier of diseases. He would go to work when he felt well. Otherwise, he just lay in bed. Hoping to earn a higher interest, he had deposited his four hundred with Chandrasekharam. That amount represented his whole life. He was now an invalid. If the four hundred were returned, it would keep him alive. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to manage. Soon after he came

to know that Chandrasekharam was ruined, his chief occupation had been to call on him continually. Chandrasekharam was terribly afraid of looking the thin and bony Ellamanda in the eye. Not just Ellamanda, but all the other creditors also called at his house every now and then. God, if at least a quarter in every rupee was returned, that would be enough, some felt. Some castigated him, "Is it enough if you borrow and swallow? A beast eats unthinkingly and so do you, collecting from everybody all around."

"If we can't make you vomit up our money, see if we don't shave off our moustaches," some vowed. Others made their rounds to his house, tears in their eyes.

On hearing about Ellamanda, Chandrasekharam suddenly felt his body go cold. The coffee tasted insipid. Without drinking it, he handed the coffee cup back to his wife.

"Why haven't you drunk it?"

"Are you helping me drink it?"

"What have I done?"

"Instead of putting him on to me, couldn't you have diverted him to Pullayya?"

Comprehending his state of mind, Lalitha silently took the cup of coffee back to the yard.

Since the opening of the trial, Chandrasekharam had felt as if he were rolling on live coals. In his imagination it was as if the whole world had united to conspire against him, and that the forgery case was a part of it. If there had been no such conspiracy, the mill could not have been wrecked. He would not have incurred so many debts. On his part, not even a speck of a mistake. No, not even something the size of a mustard seed. He tried to prove that he was entirely innocent. Forgetful of time or how appropriate it was, he talked wildly about his innocence. Instead of sympathy, it was suspicion about him that increased. Imagining that conspiracy was the cause of his downfall he derived some peace of mind by propagating this idea as much as possible. "The mill was managed in a grossly stupid fashion. Because of me so many families are suffering. How can I show my face to them?" — this kind of sorrow and remorse had disappeared completely.

The day when the judgement would be pronounced drew near. What he really feared more than punishment was the possibility of proof that there was no plot against him. If, even by chance, his wife so much as hinted that there was no such conspiracy, he would flare up angrily. He expressed his despair that even his wife was colluding with his enemies. He was unable to bear even the most trifling remark she made in Pullayya's favour. Only if he imagined that there was a plot against him could he presume that he was fighting on behalf of the workers, and that all of them were on his side. Only then was it possible to experience the thrill of believing that he was sacrificing his life in the pursuit of a noble ideal. How could anyone deny a plot?

His wife returned from the backyard. "Have you sent Elamanda away?" Chandrasekharam asked.

"Yes, our ancestors had to descend to send him away."

Chandrasekharam sighed, sat at the table and began writing an article, explaining as a mill owner, his experiences with the labour working an eight-hour shift. *It is folly to suppose that a ten-hour working day will enhance production. There can be no increase in production if the labourer is driven to work beyond the limits of fatigue. Slow and unenthusiastic work will be the result, with production flattening out, not showing any rise. Besides, weariness and negligence will follow as a result of working overtime, leading to a greater possibility of accidents.*

To those people who think that leisure wrecks a man's life, enslaving him to bad habits and that is reason enough to make him work without a break, I cannot say anything. Though the hours of work were reduced in our mill, production was no less than that of any other mill. As for why the mill collapsed, the reasons are to be sought elsewhere — He believed that this article would expose the corruption of capitalists, and gain the sympathy of the workers, while proving his own innocence.

Lalitha came up, holding a pot.

"Won't you search for a house?"

"What is this buzzing under the ear? After I've finished with this, you can narrate your *Bhagavatha*⁵," scowled Chandrasekharam, continuing to write.

"Do you want to be pushed out by the neck? Tell me that too. Don't you know that this house is coming up for auction next week?"

Chandrasekharam threw his pen down. He felt that Lalitha suspected he was scribbling something useless.

"Why don't you search for one yourself, instead of interrupting my writing?"

"What is that brahmartha⁶?"

"So you mean that I can't write anything except muddled scrawls?"

Lalitha looked at her husband briefly, abruptly went indoors and began washing the childrens clothes. In that impoverished condition, living in such a big house suddenly seemed unbearable.

Their situation was such that they couldn't be sure of the next day's meal. How depressing it would be to beg for another house after losing one such as this! How could she implore others to allow them to stay in their house as a tenant? On her wedding day, her father had predicted that they would reach such a wretched condition. Why wouldn't her husband search for a house while there was still time? Lalitha was hurt at his attitude.

Carrying the two-year-old in her arms, she went to her husband and said, "I asked you to split some firewood, but you still haven't. Hold the child for a while, I'll do it myself." He looked at her from top to toe. She waited to see how her husband would respond. He sighed.

"Have I hurt you?" she asked.

"I thought you would support me to some extent at a time like this. When they come tomorrow and begin slaughtering me, you will probably say, 'Won't you search for a house? Won't you split the firewood?'"

"Can we escape these chores? Moreover, we had to lay off even the servant maid." Chandrasekharam felt that she was reproaching him, "Because you have spent my money, I am reduced to this state." So he said, "Have you started again? If I throw what you want in your face, I'll be free of all trouble."

Pain shot through Lalitha as if she had been slapped and she shrank away from the feeling.

"When the whole fault lies with us, why should we blame others? These ideals have ruined us utterly."

Chandrasekharam's face flushed with anger. "What are you prattling about?"

"What my life lacks is precisely that prattle," she replied and said to the child as she lifted him up, "Would you have been born to me unless you were a destitute wretch?" and wheeling round quickly went away. Chandrasekharam sat like a statue. After some time he heard the sound of firewood being chopped in the yard. "She won't be the worse for such a small thing — could they, by any mischance, be inciting her too against me?" The thought crossed his mind. Wicked people can do anything. Their aim is to achieve their purpose, no matter at what cost.

Tossing two dried twigs before the child for him to play with, Lalitha began to split the firewood. Born in a well-to-do family, how would she know how to grip the axe or how to chop wood, placing a block of it in an appropriate position? She was unable to strike it at all, as it need a strong person to lift the axe. The stump kept slipping and leaping aside. Wiping her perspiration, she somehow carried on with the troublesome task.

Obsessed with his innocence, Chandrasekharam had ceased attending to his wife and children — even discarding his responsibility. He now behaved as if they should serve him. It was not even six weeks since the infant had passed away nor had he considered how great Lalitha's mental suffering must be. It did not even occur to him that he should console her. To top it all, he even suspected that she was conspiring with the others. She was deeply agitated by this attitude. Truly, the whole world was full of sorrow: could anything be said about the lot of women? She only wondered when she would be free of these bonds and when her sins would dissolve for God to take her away.

He was guiltless. The whole world, was pecking away at him demonically; he was fighting their devilry single-

handed and valiantly. It was the duty of a wife to support such a man and assist him, Chandrasekharam thought. So whatever Lalitha suggested, he hissed at her angrily.

When Lalitha returned, Chandrasekharam was pacing up and down in the hall. As soon as she came in, he asked her, "Is it wrong to ask you to show some compassion in the present circumstances?"

"What should I do when I am working myself to death, without once standing erect during the day?"

"Watching you labour, who will deny it? When my paternal aunt offered to keep the children with her for a few days, couldn't you have sent them? It would have also lightened your lot."

"You want me to send all three children away?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Today you tell me to send them. Tomorrow you will ask me to leave." Lalitha went indoors in utter disgust.

Chandrasekharam went out.

TWENTY-THREE

The clouds in the sky that day were thundering like political parties preparing for elections. Lalitha was standing on the verandah, looking out. "Let me look too, Amma! Me too!" Her two daughters were clambering over her like calves stretching their necks for creepers laden with juicy leaves.

Just then, she heard a familiar cough at the gate. Her heart palpitated. It was her father. Whenever she saw him, her stomach twisted. As he approached, coughing, she would invariably receive him on the porch. On his arrival she went to meet him, but ignoring her and gently pushing his granddaughters away as they came to hug him, he collapsed into a chair. Even the children found his behaviour odd.

That day, he sat gasping, walking stick between his legs and gripping its handle in his trembling hands.

"Isn't he at home even today?"

"No, nanna."

"He used to be home at this time." He was past seventy, a stalwart personality with a grey beard, an *uttareeyam* faded to a dull reddish hue with repeated washing, and grey bushy eyebrows.

"Is your cough better, nanna?"

"The cough is all right. The house, thanks to your husband, is going to be auctioned tomorrow or the day after. Your brother wants to go to Nizam¹. I don't know how I shall carry on. I have to either go with him or take to begging here."

"Nanna...nanna!"

Lalitha held her father's ankles and broke down. Her tears bathed his feet. He smiled uncertainly, the walking stick he held quivered, his head trembled.

"So, he has arranged the workers' meeting today also?" he said with a sad smile.

"No," she replied in a choked voice.

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"I'm an old ignorant man, but I would like to know if only lost souls can improve the world. Wasn't it he who robbed them of their money and made them destitute? And after that, how can he face them yet again? What will he tell them?"

Lalitha was silent and sighed.

"The nature of the workers is also strange. They don't mind how much money they are robbed of. Say a few sweet words to them and they will probably be thrilled. Whether or not they have food, a few crude slogans to take to the streets will satisfy them."

"You are not going to Nizam, are you?"

"I won't, if I can retrieve at least the thousand rupees I gave him last time. In fact he said he'd repay it in fifteen days."

"He said so with the thought of paying back."

"It is those kinds of promises that have ruined us... made us homeless crows. Who will help us today? When we had some coins to jingle, everyone welcomed us. Where are they now?" Lalitha had no answer. She pushed her tears back — behind her eyes — to their source. The old man wiped his mouth.

"Ammayi, pay some attention to what I say. You and the children — come and stay with me. If I leave for Nizam, I'll never reach there. We can get something from the fields. Am I to live in strange places without dear ones near me, leaving the fields to others? Come and stay with me. Are you listening to me or not?"

Lalitha was silent but looked sadly at her father. She shook her head, indicating her unwillingness. He blazed with fury. "I promise I won't set foot on your threshold again," he fumed as he left. When she heard his voice again, Lalitha stood up and saw her father standing at the gate, looking back.

"Have you thought about it? This is the last time I shall tell you."

Lalitha shook her head again showing her unwillingness, and went in. Sinking into a chair, she wept silently. Walk out on her husband? Impossible. Pain or pleasure, she had to share with him. Instead, should she prove the others right by allowing her marriage to end in ruin?

Chandrasekharam came home. He told his wife that the workers had decided to take out a procession on the first of the following month. He said he suspected that they might pass Pullayya's house on their way. She sensed discontent in his voice.

"I hope it wasn't your idea!" Lalitha asked.

"Oh, yes, it was I who instigated them. They have no brains."

"Stop it somehow."

"What have I got to do with it? Why should I interfere when they want to represent their difficulties? If they want to vent their grievances against shavukarus like Pullayya, how should I rebuke them?"

"Would anyone believe that you have no hand in it?" Lalitha went inside.

She felt very unhappy at the way she resented her husband at that moment. The whole world had joined hands and was railing at him doing its best to destroy him. And he by his actions was helping them in that effort. Should she too join the others to humiliate him? And trouble him? Was it for this

that she had become his ardhanga²? Who but she would stand by him in adversity?

One day they received an official notice stating that both the factory and house would be auctioned by the court. The house was to be vacated within a week. Lalitha saw no other way except to hunt for a house to rent. Without exception house owners said that they had nothing to let. Besides, to her face they were sympathetic saying how unfortunate it was that such a family was entangled in misfortune, but behind her back some said, "They deserve this. Shouldn't they have been careful in prosperity? Did they notice us then or pay attention to what we said?"

"Leaving that bull of a husband at home, look how she herself has come searching for a house!"

"She chose to marry him. Did she heed her poor father's words that day when he set his face against it? She deserves this," another remarked.

"If we allow these paupers to stay with us, that Sani will also affect us," was another housewife's remark. All this reached Lalitha. She went home, collapsed in a chair and wept bitterly.

What was the use of weeping? There was a vacant chavadi³ in the village. Her father had thought of arranging her marriage with its owner but as she had not agreed, it had not gone through. Now, how could Lalitha go to that very man and beg to be allowed to rent his chavadi? She did not understand why she hadn't died. As there was no alternative she had to ask him for the chavadi. He agreed. It was at the other end of the village.

Early one morning a cart set off with luggage from the large house. The two elder children sat on top of the load. Holding the third child in her arms, Lalitha walked behind the cart. With hands in his pockets and head bowed, Chandrasekhar-am followed her at a distance. The cart reached the chavadi.

It was small and thatched and had only three rooms. Not being used to bending through low doorways Lalitha walked upright into the house, and injured her head against the lintel. Inside, there were cobwebs and the walls were ridden with

termites. By the time Lalitha had slaved to make the place habitable, she was reminded of the way her mother used to work. Something even more horrible happened. She was forced to borrow money for daily provisions from the owner of the chavadi. Lalitha could not understand why Mother Earth had not swallowed her at one go. Why was all this happening? Wasn't her husband the cause of it all? Her bursts of temper became frequent. In fact, they rarely spoke to each other now. Even if they did so by mistake, their conversation was loaded with mutual accusations.

TWENTY-FOUR

Human nature is very strange. An atom can be split, the moon visited and the conditions there ascertained, the human body cut to pieces and stitched together to restore life. But the mind that achieves all these things cannot be fathomed, nor its capacity imagined. We cannot draw boundaries to define its limits.

Consider the case of the doctor. He had heard what Lakshmamma once muttered in her delirium. He was not altogether unfamiliar with human psychology. Of course, he had no propensity to treachery. "Brother Sekharam, treat me in whatever way you like. Burn me on live coals. Throw and roast me in hell. I will undergo the punishment. But Ramudu is innocent and Seetha more so," Lakshmamma once muttered in her delirium. Another time she mumbled, "Why do you wait, handcuff me and take me to jail... I bow to you humbly, throw away the sharp stakes. My children are blameless. Even my husband doesn't like this," she wailed aloud. "You have no sense of justice and fairplay. No mercy and pity. He stands for truth. Arrest me!" she screamed once.

Had the doctor tried to make sense of this delirious talk, he would have known the truth. He was actually quite capable of it, but unconsciously his failure to effect a compromise vitiated his judgement. If Chandrasekharam hadn't really been

guilty, he would have forgiven Pullayya for the harm he had done him and been willing to compromise. As Chandrasekharam had not followed that track, he must truly be at fault. That idea lay embedded in the doctor's mind. The doctor felt that as he had been impartial in the matter, his word should have counted — which would have meant the victory of dharma. Since this notion was probably at the back of his mind, Vasudeva Sastri couldn't interpret Lakshmamamma's delirious chatter. Further, he thought that she was merely anguished that things might actually happen the way she feared they would. Apart from this, she had a tender heart which could not bear the slightest pain others suffered. If everyone was like her, wouldn't the world be a veritable heaven? — he thought and appreciated her deeply.

When Pullayya realised that the doctor had heard her delirious talk, his face blanched. He didn't dare face the doctor. Whenever the doctor called at his house, Pullayya sneaked out. If the doctor came when he was at home, he used to slip out into the backyard. The doctor ought to have guessed the truth at least from this conduct. But he never gave it any serious thought. One day when the patient was very ill and Pullayya was standing by the sick bed, the doctor came in. Pullayya broke down and sobbed like a child... but even then, the doctor could not surmise the reason for his behaviour. He merely thought that Pullayya was grieving over his wife's critical condition. He couldn't imagine that Pullayya was weeping because his guilt wouldn't permit him to face the doctor.

"You are the head of the family and if you break down in this manner, what will happen to the women in the household? There's nothing to worry, listen to me. The disease will run its course — just two days more. Then the fever will subside. Look at that girl. Instead of comforting her, how can you break down? There is no danger, I assure you," the doctor consoled him. His sympathy for Pullayya increased from that day onwards. His pity convinced him that Pullayya was guiltless. He was determined now to save the patient. Unless her mental agony was healed, her physical distress couldn't be cured. The arrowhead that lodged in her mind

had to be drawn to save her life. Before that, he himself had to be sure of her innocence, otherwise how could he remove her worry?

The doctor came to believe that Pullayya and his wife were completely blameless. When he came to visit the patient next morning, he took Pullayya aside and said, "The patient is worried that Chāndrasekharam has done no wrong and that it is you who are at fault; that Ramarao was taken away by the police at your instigation." So the doctor knew everything! Despite that, he still showed regard for him and his wife. Why didn't he spit in his face? Pullayya felt giddy. He felt as if the ground was giving way under his feet. Without even looking at Pullayya's face the doctor went on saying in his characteristic fashion, head bent, "All this is nothing but her suspicion and fear. I know as well as the world does that you are innocent. I will convey this to her. It is necessary that she should be told so by others as well. Otherwise, she will not be freed of her mental agony, and her fever won't subside unless that worry is erased."

The doctor did as he had said. Her daughter Seetha also told her the same thing. Ammayamma garu came to see her one day and said the police had taken away Ramarao on baseless suspicions and that he would be released soon. The doctor would never lie or do something unjust. In fact, he would oppose wrong wherever it was committed. If her husband had done any wrong, would the doctor enter their home and talk to her like this? Her husband was not at fault. The young innocent lad Ramarao might have erred. The police had taken him away without any reason, but not at the instigation of her husband. Otherwise, why did even Ammayamma garu say so? She was mistaken and was unjustly holding her husband responsible for these sins. When she who had lived with him for so many years had misjudged him, what agony she must have caused him!

"Amma, where is your father?" she asked Seetha in a feeble voice. Pullayya went silently into her room like an erring boy and sat by her. Both Seetha and Rangamma left the room.

"I have made a great mistake. I have unnecessarily blamed

you, though I know you are not such a person. Won't you please forgive me?" she said, eyes streaming. Pullayya felt as if he had been stabbed. He was unable to speak.

"Don't I know you are not angry with me, nor with him, either? Tell me, when will you get him released? That accursed money! Who cares how much is lost, if he comes back? Perhaps I may worry about the loss of money, but you won't," she said.

"Ammi, I am waiting for a chance. When he is undergoing misery there, I feel bad. They say they will let him off soon," he said. Gently he dried his wife's tears, patted the bed and adjusted the sheet that had slipped off.

Soon after, when her fever subsided, Lakshmamma was put on a special recuperative diet. She was not strong enough to walk. The easy-chair was placed by the window and she was able to sit in it.

Jaggarao as good as lived in her room now and she passed the days playing with him.

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Lakshmamma wished to get her son and daughter married that very year and see them lead happy domestic lives. All her fears had been unfounded. Chandrasekharam was the cause of it all. They said that he would be punished in any case. That would teach him a lesson. How many woes he had heaped on their happy family! Well, this was no time to remember him. How good life was! In her heart she bowed to Lord Ishwara for favouring her with such a husband, children and daughter-in-law. She needed no further bliss than this even in her next birth.

TWENTY-FIVE

The day was nearing when Lalitha's father and brother were to leave for the Nizam territory after selling their homestead and lands and settling their debts. Planning to help her father pack early next morning, Lalitha went to bed as usual. She woke to a

knock on the door at four in the morning. In the dim light of the bed lamp, she saw her younger brother's ashen face.

"Nanna.... nanna...." he muttered, unable to say anything else. He stood outside, immobile.

"Why don't you come in? What about nanna?"

Her younger brother couldn't answer immediately. He came in dragging his feet, and sank down on the floor. Afraid even to enquire what the matter was, Lalitha stood, unmoving and silent, waiting for him to say something, staring anxiously at him. He gasped, "Nobody has seen Nanna since last evening. I searched the whole village, asked everyone I met. No one could say anything about him. Fields, wells and tanks — I looked everywhere. He was nowhere. At last he was found hanging from the beam of the roof."

Chandrasekharam woke up late in the morning, washed his face and found Lalitha looking utterly bewildered. The hearth was cold.

"Why are you looking so disturbed? What has happened?" he asked her.

"Nothing," Lalitha replied and remained silent.

Even on that day Lalitha had to attend to all the household chores. Her elder daughter had to be sent to school, the younger ones had to be looked after at home, she had to go in one direction to fetch buttermilk and in another to fetch two pots of drinking water. While she was engaged in all these activities, she felt as if her father was accompanying her. Unable to leave the home and village that had been theirs for generations, her father had taken his own precious life. Her father's figure, as it must have looked hanging from the beam in the chavadi, appeared before her eyes. As a child she had played hide-and-seek in that very chavadi. When her mother beat her, when her father chastised her, she had hidden, sulking, in that very loft.

"It's your own fault. Why did you marry him? That is why we have come to such a pass." These words appeared to ring in her ears. Each foot she covered felt like many miles.

The moment Chandrasekharam knew what had happened, he collapsed in a heap, covering his face with his hands. He

had a vision of his father-in-law accosting him, saying, "You are the reason for all this." He howled, "Lalitha, I am responsible for all this, but I can't bear this burden alone. Won't you support me?" She couldn't speak. When he came home in the afternoon, he found Lalitha sitting in the empty house, staring wildly. Claspings the hem of her saree, her little son kept crying aloud, "Amma, amma." She neither moved nor responded. She looked at Chandrasekharam too with the same uncomprehending look. He was unable to make out whether she feared him or hated him. Although he was aware that he was personally responsible for this, he thought, in addition to the other things she wants to blame me for this, too. He was annoyed and thought that to some extent Lalitha too was the cause of their troubles.

Each nervous of the other, their manner to one another grew distant. They were a couple who had enjoyed years of mutual affection and understanding. But poverty, the ruined house and this recent incident created a gulf between them. Lalitha placed the child's milk on the fire and sat looking at it. The figure of her father, hanging, appeared before her. His words imploring her to go with him, taking her children, echoed in her ears. She sat trembling, crazed with fear. The milk rose, foaming. Her father had come visiting, full of concern for her. And she had caused his death.

The milk boiled over, but she didn't notice it at all. She felt the ground sinking under her. Terrible hands seemed to be reaching out for her to drag her away. She shook with fear from head to foot. Involuntarily, she tried to defend herself.

All this had occurred because they had lost the property. If her husband was really innocent, the morals her father had preached to her could have been passed on to Chandrasekharam's enemies. She found comfort in presuming Chandrasekharam to be blameless. Ultimately, he would be found guiltless.

Chandrasekharam went to his father-in-law's house that day. Unable to drag herself to that place, Lalitha stayed behind at home. Even Chandrasekharam, having gone to the chavadi, returned home, unable to look at his father-in-law

hanging from the roof. By the time he came back, Lalitha was slumped in the chair, her face covered with her hands, her elbows on the table.

"Where are the children?" Chandrasekharam asked, looking down.

"I've sent them away," there was despair in her voice.

Deeply suspicious, he pushed aside the bamboo partition and looked into the next room. The children were not there either. "Where have you sent them?"

"I sent word to your aunt. She has just left with them." Chandrasekharam stood staring at his wife.

"I thought that would comfort you to some extent."

He didn't reply.

That night the bedroom was desolate. The children's cots had not been lowered. They still stood against the wall. Turning towards him fearfully, Lalitha lay on another cot by her husband's. His guiltlessness was her refuge. She wished to support him, express her faith and loyalty. Yet she didn't speak. She didn't wish to say anything callous. She was unable to utter words of solace. The silence gradually became unbearable: no childish mutters of sleeping children, no sounds of breathing. There was no need to even adjust their sheets. Silence and the recent rift between them led both to introspection. The image of the old man hanging from the roof haunted both of them.

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Chandrasekharam lay on the cot looking at his wife. Lalitha was afraid even to sleep. She looked around the house for her children.

"At least this time I am not at fault. But... what's the use? She will reproach me even for this," thought Chandrasekharam.

At last Lalitha joined him on his bed. Hands linked under her head, she lay looking at the beam of the roof. Suppose she did some untoward thing after he had gone to sleep? A small lantern glowed near the cot. He didn't dare to put it out.

"Won't you raise the wick of the lantern?" Lalitha asked, still looking at the rafter in the roof.

Finally, he put out the lamp. Moonlight filtered through the window. Both of them kept looking at it. There was no slumbering child on the bed needing adjustment. So they lay on the cot unmoving. Lalitha remembered her father's last words about her husband. "It would have been better if I had confided my difficulties earlier. The situation has gone beyond our control and what is the use of weeping now? The past won't return. But what wrong have I done?"

Chandrasekharam remembered the incident of the last loan of a thousand rupees that he had taken from his father-in-law. He had given his father-in-law false hopes which he himself began to believe. Surely his ideals would win through. He still believed in them. But what was the consequence? He shuddered. Lalitha sensed his sorrow. And with that her sorrow burst its banks.

Was it his fault? If it was, then it was hers too. No! The blame was neither his nor hers. He was without taint. And he had to be faultless — for sure.

140 She stretched out her hand and he took it in his own. "Is it wrong to marry when one has loved?" she thought. She recalled the happy years of her past. They proved his innocence. But the vision of her father's body hanging from the roof appeared to contradict her. She shook with fear and clasped her husband's hand. Both of them gained courage to some extent with this. Now each began to think about the other sympathically. They appreciated their distress more clearly.

"Your situation is far worse," Chandrasekharam grieved.

"When I think of your condition, my insides turn to water."

"I am a man. Besides, it is *your* father who died," Chandrasekharam said.

His words brought the figure of her father before her eyes again and she shook with fear, wanting to shelter under husband's innocence. She lay touching him. He covered her with his blanket.

"If he hadn't done what he did, all this wouldn't have happened," she said. Chandrasekharam understood what she

meant. People like Pullayya personified injustice. These shavukarus were so sinful, while it appeared to them that they themselves were fighting for justice and truth. When Chandrasekharam heard his wife's words, he felt elated.

After sometime Lalitha said slowly, "Perhaps he forced Madhavayya's wife to give that affidavit."

"Exactly," said Chandrasekharam. "What a pity! These workers can't free themselves from oppression."

"If this is the state of affairs, how can they?"

Her words cheered him up. Earlier Lalitha used to snap at him when he said the same thing. Now all those words were coming from that very source. Her faith in her husband was totally restored.

"It would have been good if insurance and other things for workers had been introduced," she said.

"True, but there are no such possibilities now."

"If the mill had lasted, wouldn't the workers' condition have been better?"

"Certainly, but everything was ruined by the shavukar's plots. I did not understand their devilry until now."

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"Such evil people! If people prosper, their eyes burn. I was unable to understand you. Won't you forgive me?"

"What's there to forgive? You will understand everything gradually," he said.

There developed between the two, a great bond of faith. The whole world was going astray... the two of them had to unite to fight injustice.

TWENTY-SIX

Having finished his bath and coffee, the doctor was arranging his medicine bag. Just then, a couple of boys came running to him gasping, "Doctor garu, doctor garu." Perplexed, the doctor stood still. One of the boys spluttered, "You see... you see...", but said nothing further. The other boy couldn't even speak.

"Oray, why don't you tell me what the matter is?" The doctor shook Mallayya's son by the shoulder. Breathing with some difficulty the boy began, "The labourers from the Har-ijan quarter entered the village, holding flags, shouting slogans. On reaching Pullayya's chavadi, they stopped and shouted at the top of their voices. Pullayya's young bull was frightened and breaking its rope, ran into the crowd. It gored a boy's thigh. It then ripped open the boy's stomach and laid bare his guts. It also trampled an old man. Very soon, Polayya took a cudgel and no one knew where he hit it, but the bull fell whirling. Not one of the thronging hundreds stayed. They rushed away in confusion."

Taking Satyanarayana Pantulu along with him, the doctor hurried towards Pullayya's chavadi with the boys. The injured boy lay unconscious and bleeding. The old man sat moaning, unable to get up. Holding a thick staff Pullayya paced to and fro by the dead bull, shaking in fury from head to foot, ready to kill anyone who approached. The doctor lifted the injured boy in his arms and asking others to somehow escort the old man to his house, left the place.

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- Satyanarayana Pantulu was afraid to approach Pullayya who was now insensible to the world. Whoever went near him would surely get a blow from that stout staff. Satyanarayana Pantulu who knew Pullayya's nature also turned towards the bull and stood staring at it. Strangely, the place was deserted. The sun was high in the sky. Just at that time a heifer came running, its rope about its neck. Satyanarayana Pantulu was standing in the middle of the street. Kusalayya was running after the heifer, shouting.

"She has broken loose, Pantulu garu, move aside," said Pullayya. Satyanarayana Pantulu was about to move away.

"It's not tossing its horns. Hold it, Pantulu garu, hold it," Kusalayya shouted. Satyanarayana Pantulu caught the heifer's rope. In an instant Kusalayya drew near, held the rope and looking at the dead bull, said, "The brutes! What they have done? How could they!"

"Yes, Kusalayya, they have done something inhuman," he said.

"How long can we keep it here? I will tie up the heifer in a moment and fetch some men," Kusalayya said. Securing the heifer in front of the house, he fetched Ramayya and four other ryots¹. What was the use of taking the body into the backyard? They decided to bury it as soon as possible. From the chavadi Pullayya's cart was brought, drawn by a pair of sturdy field bullocks. Very soon, the villagers gathered. The body of the bull was lifted onto the cart and they were about to leave. Then Ramayya proposed that it should be taken to the field in a procession through the village. Slowly, all the others supported the idea. Someone fetched sannayi melam². When the cart moved forward, all the others gathered except Mallayya, the Brahmins and the Vaisyas. The cart halted at each door. A pot or two of water mixed with turmeric and vermilion was poured on the hump of the bull at every house. Those who could, showered cotton seeds³ on it. It was evening by the time the procession and the burial ended. Pullayya stayed there all through. But Satyanarayana Pantulu came home immediately after the cart had moved, bathed⁴ and went to bed.

With this incident, the whole village was enraged at the Harijans. Everyone sympathised with Pullayya. The Malas and Madigas were getting out of control. "Isn't it because we are lenient that they have stormed into the village? When they can do this today, what won't they do tomorrow? Such things are happening only because there is no proper unity in the village," said some people. "In fact in our days a Mala or Madiga didn't dare to walk with his chappals on, even at noon during Rohini Karte⁵. Bad times are fostering bad thoughts," remarked the elders. But no one in the village inquired whether the injured boy was alive or dead or what had happened to the old man. Nor did anyone go to the doctor's to learn their condition.

Later, at night, someone knocked on the doctor's door. "Who is there?" Vasudeva Sastri opened the door and stared at the person standing in the dark.

"You! What a wicked man you are!"

"Dora garu, I shouldn't be alive. It is a sin. Otherwise, this

would not have happened. Really, it would not have happened. Why did I oppose the procession? Why did all the Harijans drag me by force? Why did they make such a maddening noise, like people possessed, at Pullayya doragaru's chavadi? Why did the bull break loose and dash into the people? Why did it gore my son in the thigh? Why did I see the blood? Why did I hit it when there were so many people? Why did it die? Doragaru, this is my karma. It's wrong for me to live. Why didn't death come to me? Babu, as you said I am really a wicked person."

The doctor had never expected Polayya to talk like this. In fact, the doctor hadn't thought of the circumstances at all. He was merely annoyed that Polayya hadn't turned up for the major surgery planned for his son who was seriously injured. Polayya's words suddenly made everything clear. If they saw him, the villagers wouldn't let Polayya off alive.

"Why stand there? Come in," the doctor dragged him inside anxiously.

"How is he, doragaru?"

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Vasudeva Sastri led him to his sleeping son. "He's now out of danger. For the next twenty days, we must watch him carefully. He shouldn't be allowed to move," the doctor said.

"What about that old man?"

"He had minor injuries. Nothing dangerous. I sent him away in the morning. Haven't you seen him?"

"I haven't even gone to the harijan quarter."

"What is to be done now?"

"That's what I can't think of."

"Shouldn't you have asked the gentleman who started the procession yesterday?"

"Dora, if a person like you, who knows everything, says so — what will happen to wretched people like us?"

Pollayya sounded close to breaking down.

"What happened was very stupid. They should have passed on peacefully. Look, how explosive it has become. Is there any way we can save the situation?"

"Dora, people like me are able to live because of masters like you".

"But now what do you want me to do? You should have thought long and clearly before you started the procession."

"I told them not to take it out, dora. Did they listen to me? How can I live after going against everyone around me? Will it be possible for me to live in the Harijan quarter again?"

The doctor thought for a while. He rose from the chair and paced up and down a couple of times.

"Then go to him and fall at his feet."

"To Pullayya garu?" Polayya asked in perplexity.

"Yes, to him. There doesn't seem to be any other way out at present. You have to, if the quarrel is to end with this. I doubt whether he will agree to put the incident behind him. Such a lot of trouble has been created in the village. His bull has been killed. Will he keep quiet?"

Polayya remained silent.

"You stay here. I'll be back in a moment," said the doctor, and left, putting on the uttareeyam. Polayya sat there, his mind buzzing. The future stared bleakly at him. It would have been all right if he had been alone. But his wife and children! She was ailing. And his children were still young. The boy who was old enough to help him had suffered this fate. How could his family reach the shore? If he were sent to jail, what would their fate be? The more he thought, the more it looked like he might go mad. So he shut his eyes tight. Visions of the dead bull and his eldest son, entrails spilling, alternated before him. He was drenched in perspiration. He couldn't stand it any more, so he opened his eyes. "Oh, God! The fate you've given me," he thought. He got up and walked around in the hall. Meanwhile, he heard his son groaning and muttering. He was startled but pulled himself together. "Will the doctor come at least by early morning?" He yawned. Just then, Vasudeva Sastri came in.

"What has happened, dora?"

"What can happen? His bull cost at least six hundred rupees. You have to either pay the amount or leave the village," the doctor sighed.

"If I had six hundred rupees, why would I need the sangam or the processions, dora garu?"

"That's what I too told him."

"As for me, I was born and raised in this village. I can earn an honest livelihood anywhere here. After what has happened will I be allowed to live anywhere else? Won't this bull-killer, this quarrelsome fellow, be driven away? Which landlord would employ me as his servant? I know nothing except farming. With the weight of this blame on my head, where shall I wander unemployed, babu? Tell me, is that just?"

"What should I say when that man has no faith in me and is so brusque? There is no use. I have tried my best. When he doesn't take my word, what can I do?"

Polayya was silent for some time.

"Now what is to be done, doragaru?"

"That's what I am unable to decide. All right, you had better see Pullayya once: if he is still adamant, then what is to happen will happen. There is nothing the matter with your son. Don't worry about him."

"You are one in a hundred or thousand, babu. Because of people like you, people like us are able to live like this. Permit me to leave," raising both his hands in a salute, palms together, he went away.

"Man worships even animals as gods, but can't show compassion for a fellow human being," said the doctor, sighing.

Next morning, even before the doctor left his bed, a boy came running to say that Punnayya was on his deathbed and simply had to see the doctor. Grabbing his medicine bag, the doctor rushed out.

Punnayya had been bedridden for three months. The doctor knew that his disease was incurable, but didn't say so. Punnayya's wife must have guessed. He was old. They didn't possess even an egani⁶. The doctor could treat him without any charge, but could he also buy medicines for him? So, she did her best for her husband, and entrusting matters to heaven, spent her days in Pullayya's thatched chavadi outside the village.

The doctor had to pass by Pullayya's chavadi in the village. He glanced casually into the backward. Pullayya was straightening collapsed vegetable plants and tying them upright.

"You seem to be toiling hard today. No labourer?"

"No, this is no trouble at all. If a farmer stands on prestige, how can he farm? Farming means kneading clay and dung with one's hands."

"As Guvvalachenna⁷ says, nothing is equal to the profession of one's caste," Vasudeva Sastri laughed and left.

As he neared Punnayya's house he heard the sound of weeping. At the sound of his chappals, Punnayya's wife wiping her eyes and nose came out to usher the doctor in. Sitting on a low stool beside the bed, the doctor examined the patient. The swan⁸ wouldn't stay much longer, yet the patient was conscious. He recognised the doctor and spoke to him as if from the bottom of a deep well. The doctor put his ear to his mouth and listened to him.

"Doctor garu, I am going to die. Having reached this state, I can't continue to lie. I live only to tell you a single word. It is a fact that Pullayya garu stood guarantee to Chandrasekhar-am. I was present when the witnesses were signing. But, when I had to tell the truth, my mouth was sealed. Will rebirth be my fate? No, God won't forgive such a sinner."

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The doctor was stunned but soon recovered to say, "Don't worry. Is there anything that God doesn't know? Even now, it is not too late. Your wife can depose this fact in court tomorrow."

Punnayya spoke through fits of coughing. "If the truth is uttered, we won't get even a shade to shelter our heads, doctor babu," he lamented. Vasudeva Sastri didn't know what say. He comforted Punnayya as well as he could, poured tulasi⁹ water in his mouth and left for home.

The doctor was extremely perplexed. Was the whole world full of sin? Was there no one free of iniquity? If so, what was this life, this world for? Who could redeem it? Why did it come into being? What was its meaning? Was it in the nature of the world to be like this? If it was its nature, then life was meaningless. In fact, where was the need to live?

Perhaps I am mistaken. What Punnayya said might have been in a delirious fit. No he was conscious when he said it. There was no doubt at all. Did, then, Pullayya commit this

gross injustice? Though discriminating between justice and injustice is man's goal, why should he judge others? Such judgements lead one to hell. Is there any way other than following the dictates of my own conscience, though giving a careful ear to what others say? That was the right thing, he thought, and sighed.

TWENTY-SEVEN

About the time the torching of houses and hayricks in the village began, Mallayya became alarmed. He never thought that factionalism would reach such a stage. If the holocaust continued, it was he and no other who would be put to loss. He began calculating how many burnt huts of vagrants would be equal to his hayricks. It dawned on him that it was not a profitable proposition. Besides this, Chandrasekharam had begun instigating the workers against the shavukarus, which in that village meant himself and Pullayya, didn't it? Though he was indirectly helping Chandrasekharam so much, that wretched man had no regard for him. In that case, why should he help him?

Apart from this, the people from the Harijan quarter descended on the village, clamouring for increased wages. In the past, had these Malas and Madigas ever had the guts to come to the centre of the village at any time? Would they have taken the life of a tender bull? If they did this today, what wouldn't they dare to do tomorrow? There was no point being passive. Moreover, the previous day's incident, had united the whole village. Quite apart from the loss caused by increased wages, there would be no one to respond to their call in times of need; therefore, whether it was to suppress these manual labourers or to gain a reputation in the village, he should not remain inactive.

Mallayya walked straight to the Harijan ashram. Ammayamma garu was also in a similar predicament. She was

terrified by the events. If she and her ashram were to be safe, she thought, these coolie fellows should be shown their place. Both of them came to an understanding. Ammayamma garu, accompanied by Mallayya, met the minister and explained to him how the communists were unleashing terror in the village and how insecure their lives would become unless the police force was sent immediately. Mallayya vouched for her every word.

Not many days passed before the Malabar Special Police force descended on the village. Just a few days before its arrival, the news spread in the village. By the evening of that day, not a single human remained in the Harijan quarter. Abandoning everything, they fled to neighbouring villages. Soon after their arrival, the Police Force surrounded and conducted a house-to-house search in the two areas where the Malas and Madigas lived. They found nothing. Their anger and frustration at finding nothing was extended to mud pots and dishes that *were* found. When a pregnant cow leaped with fear near a house, unaware of police authority, they shot it. If police power is challenged, how can it escape punishment? They went to Polayya's house with full bundobast¹ and found the door bolted. The chain was not fastened outside. When pushed, it did not open.

"Aray, somebody is inside."

"Otherwise, why doesn't the door open?"

"That's what I say too. Go on and push hard this time."

"I have already pushed it. Now it is your turn. You're stronger than me, aren't you?"

"If you are so timid, how did you join this force? The rascals who recruit people must be blamed."

The policeman pushed the door but it didn't move. So his suspicion increased. Surely, somebody must have bolted himself inside.

"Will you open the door or not? One... two... three..." he fired the gun into the air, but the door didn't move. More policemen joined him. Their shoulders to the door, they pushed it hard and fell flat. Actually, the frame of the cot barring the door was broken. There were sounds on the loft.

When they combed it, ten communist mice scurried out.

The police force camped in the village that night. Dinner was furnished with one or two rams that were caught. Posting sentries on all four sides of the village, the police officer slept in a comfortable house. A slight drizzle. A strong cold wind, laden with rain.

"If there had been no trouble here, wouldn't we have slept cosily in the barracks!"

"If there was no trouble at all, why should they feed you?"

"By the by, why haven't these bastards left even a single female behind!"

"That is what is strange. But what I want to know is how these fellows knew we were coming?"

"What do you mean? What happens at the approach of fire? Won't you feel the heat? When our troops come, everyone is terrified."

"Look, there's someone."

"A ray, a woman. She comes for our friend." Laughter.

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Recognising it to be a heifer after it had gone a hundred yards, Zero Six spat out a couple of obscenities. Angrily he chased it towards the village for another hundred yards. Just then, he thought he heard the clinking of bangles by the roadside. He stood staring into the dark. Water splashed from the pot, and someone appeared to be walking up the road. He followed and suddenly pounced on the person. Both of them tumbled down with the impact. The other person tried to shout. He clamped the person's mouth tight. Just then lightning flashed and in the light they saw each other. She could tell by his cap that resistance was useless. She raised her hands only in supplication. The beast, inflamed with passion, satisfied his lust and then called the others. A fiendish deed was perpetrated on an innocent person. The person didn't move. One among them suspected something. On careful examination, they found her dead. They looked at one another. Finally, four of them carried her body and threw it in the tank nearby.

When day broke, the news had spread like fire through the village, but no one had the courage to speak up. After the

doctor had carried out the autopsy, her relatives cremated the body. Except for gnashing his teeth, Vasudeva Sastri couldn't do anything. Kusalayya came to the doctor that afternoon, and said hesitantly, "The cattle in the Harijan quarter are in great distress for lack of food and water. Their suffering won't bring any good to the village. Convince the police somehow and give us a chance to untie and drive the cattle away."

"But Kusalayya, do you mean to say that I have brought the police into the village?"

"Rama, Rama, would any one who eats food say that? If respected people like you tell them, they might possibly agree. That was my idea and nothing more."

The doctor regretted losing his temper.

"Elders will be respected by gentleman like you, but of what use are they before wild animals?"

Kusalayya could not say anything and stood there, worried.

"Why don't you try sending a message to them through Pullayya or Mallayya or Ammayamma garu?"

"When I asked them, none of the three said anything. They were silent, afraid that they might be in trouble if they said something. If somehow the rope collars are untied and the cattle driven away, it would be good. But can we see an opening big enough to even permit the entry of an ant?"

The doctor immediately tried to go and talk with the military police officer, but finding it impossible, returned. That night, with Ramayya, Gavarayya and ten youngsters accompanying him, Kusalayya somehow untied the rest of the cattle and shoved them away. Sensing what was happening, the police chased them, but they escaped into the village. This incident directed the officer's anger against the village. The next morning he diverted his force. They caught hold of just about anyone they could lay their hands on, and stripped them naked. Not discriminating between men and women, they marched the people along the streets to the statue of Gandhiji in the middle of the village and made them bow to it. Everyone in the village burned with indignation but there were guns on the other side. They were confused as to what they should do.

Vasudeva Sastri couldn't tolerate it. Though Satyanarayana Pantulu and Padma implored him, he shook them off and came out into the street. He didn't even notice whether anyone was following him. He walked briskly up to the officer standing by Gandhiji's statue and lashed out at him, "Are you men or beasts? Are you driven here to tear and devour innocent people? Is this the way to respect Gandhiji? Will you continue in your jobs if the government comes to know of this?" He began to talk in English. "Shut up, you fool," said the officer, swinging out at the doctor, but he himself suddenly fell, reeling, at a distance. Astonished, the doctor looked around and saw Polayya. As he watched, the police pounced on him. What happened later was not known. When he came back to his senses, he was in his house. He saw many people around and wondered whether his eye was deceiving him or whether he was dreaming. It was neither. He touched and felt a bandage on his head. Immediately remembering the incident with the police officer, "Polayya" he mumbled.

"The devils have killed him," said Satyanarayana Pantulu.

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"Killed him!"

Tears slid from the doctor's eyes. Every head was bowed. After sometime, Mallayya's son got up and said, "If we keep watching, these bastards will continue their atrocities. We have to finish them today. If the grown-ups lack courage, let them be. We, the youth, will settle the matter."

"Abbayi, well said, though you are a youngster. Try as he might, you father will never possess you understanding. What are you fellows still waiting for?" said Kusalayya.

Everyone stood up and got ready.

"Stop, what do you want to do? You've taken leave of your senses. That's why the government is persecuting you. Perhaps you are under the delusion that there are only those hundred people that we see. If something happens to them, tomorrow a regiment will descend on us. There won't even be ashes left here, leave alone houses. Perhaps you are thinking that it is still the foolish British Government in power. You are mistaken. Whether it is trouble or tinfoil, close your eyes for just these four days... only four days. If it doesn't settle

by then, we shall think of the matter afterwards. Aray, Mallayya's son, I mean you! You're already growing a moustache, I didn't notice. Kusalayya raise the lantern."

Mallayya's son bowed his head in shame.

"Do you understand what I said? You boys are capable of doing anything; but be careful for the next few days. Stay where you are and lie low."

They all left without another word. Satyanarayanan Pantulu also went to bed after his wife mentioned it a couple of times. Padma saw tears coursing down the cheeks of the doctor. She felt his forehead, but he didn't seem to have fever.

"Does it still hurt?"

He shook his head.

"Then?"

"Nothing ... but whatever the case, one's moral strength is important. You know Polayya. He always addressed me as 'doragaru, doragaru'. I used to get irritated. Then for a little while he would correct himself. When he came back, he would again call me, 'doragaru, doragaru'. A long time ago, I gave a few tablets when his wife was ill. Since that day he had such faith in me. When the fires began and there was chaos in the village, leaving his wife and children alone he used to guard my house. Though I steadfastly refused his help, he wouldn't listen to me. In those days, I used to sleep on the pyol for his sake."

"Really? None of us knew!"

"How will you know? now such a person took part in the procession the day before yesterday, as he had no choice. Who would say that asking for a wage increase was wrong? As it happened, due to his karma, Pullayya's calf took fright and spilled the boys guts. He could not remain passive as it was threatening someone's life. With one blow the bull fell, whirling. He was terribly unhappy. The villagers that day saw only the death of the bull. But no one cared for the boy. To-day, so many animals and men are being tormented. How are they standing by passively? But Polayya did not remain passive. He continued to guard the village. Suppose I am hit, what does he lose? Moreover, I who rebuked him for killing the

bull, where was the need for him to save me? For me, a person whom he believed in, he has sacrificed his life. If he had not been there, where would I have been? Who is the real dora? He used to address me frequently as 'doragaru,' perhaps only to be called 'dora' himself. I did not know this. In my folly, I rebuked him."

"Please, control yourself. What's the use of reminiscing? Both of you are certainly doras."

"No, Padma! He has become the dora and turned me into a servant. I cannot forget him in this life."

"Now, go to sleep."

Two drops of tears fell on the doctor's face. Bewildered, he looked into Padma's face. Quickly she turned her face aside.

Early in the morning, the doctor called, "Satyanarayana, Satyanarayana".

Satyanarayana Pantulu, deep in slumber, did not reply. Saying that she would call him, Padma rose from the chair. So Padma hadn't slept! He was surprised. Why should she keep awake for him? Why should others be troubled on his account? Poor woman, Padma can't bear another's suffering. That's how womanly hearts are. At the sight of the slightest pain they burst into tears.

Satyanarayana Pantulu came and enquired, "Did you call me?"

"Yes, there is some work. Open the drawer and take out my letter pad. Write what I say. Don't write untidily. I wish I could write. But my hand will not move."

"Please, don't get up. Now I am ready." Taking a paper and pen, Satyanarayana Pantulu looked at the doctor, all set. He began:

To the Hon'ble Minister-

In 1942 while you were a detenué, you had a cell-mate. Perhaps you don't remember. He was a bit tall and rather taciturn, always plunged in thought. You used to suffer from asthma in those days. That reticent person treated you. Now you remember him? All right, after the release from prison you compelled him to contest the M.L.A. election. You have even stopped talking with him for

not taking your advice. Do you remember him at least now? Doesn't matter, why recall the misunderstanding?

You have sent the Malabar Police Force to our village. I believe you wouldn't have sent it without cause. I know your nature well. You may have received a report from this place, I have no doubt about it. But before sending the police, some inquiry should have been conducted. Those who were supposed to be responsible for whipping up troubles should have been arrested and tried in court and punished, in the event of their being really guilty. Such a thing has not happened till now. For a single error, it is unjust to harass four thousand people. The whole of Bharat boiled with rage on just hearing the atrocities that occurred in Jallianwalabagh. Today such things are happening before our very eyes. As we watch them, everything else seems to be unreal. Perhaps you may suspect that the present writer is a communist. But how can I help it? If you think so, not merely I but all the people of this village are communists. By the same reckoning, you too — if you have not changed in the mean time — might be a communist.

In fact, where have these communists dropped down from? How many heads do each of them have? How long are their fangs? This might anger you. But truth is always unpalatable. I ask you out of ignorance: not allowing cattle to drink and feed for days on end; stripping people naked and making them bow to Gandhiji's statue; gang-raping a woman found alone, killing her and throwing her body in a tank; waking people in their houses and shooting them outside the village; beating up those who protest till their bones powder — aren't these the acts of communists? I have always thought that these are the activities of communists. Am I mistaken?

Everyone hates anarchy, injustice, aggression and violence, and tries to resist them with all his strength. But those are not the only ways to destroy a man. Supposing there are other ways, there would be no difference between the communists and the present government. No one would, of course, say that anarchy and other things should be tolerated. In addition to the requisite manpower, there are courts of justice and law. Present the guilty — when they are proved so beyond doubt — in court where the matter will be decided. That in fact is democracy and that justice.

So far as I know there is no one in this village who is a

communist. Some violence has erupted in the recent past because of local conflicts. If the government had conducted inquiries and taken proper action through the court, it would have prevented conditions from worsening. Even now there is a chance to rectify matters. If you could personally visit us to confirm the facts for yourself, it would be better. Alternatively, some senior official may be deputed, but first it is necessary to withdraw the Police Force. In the event of your inability to intervene in the matter, please tell us so. There are people and there is the press. It's not my intention to allow the situation here to worsen and thereby gain a position in the party.

When you realise that I am unable to write this letter personally, you can understand the conditions here. Yours faithfully.

Satyanarayana Pantulu completed writing the letter and gave the pen and paper to the doctor who signed it with great difficulty.

Before that evening Satyanarayana Pantulu got a thousand signatories to the petition and left for town. On his way, he met and despatched a very close doctor friend of Vasudeva Sastri who tried to take Vasudeva Sastri to town in his car. But Vasudeva Sastri didn't want to go. As there was no other way, he bandaged the patient in the village and entrusted the required medicines to Padma. The doctor wanted to stay in the village until Vasudeva Sastri recovered, at least slightly. But Vasudeva Sastri forced him to leave, as both his practice in town and waiting patients would suffer. "If necessary, you can visit me once in four days in your car," he suggested to him.

Just a few days later, the Special Police Force left the village. Vasudeva Sastri was slowly able to regain his strength to move about in the house.

Along with the Malabar Special Police Force, summer retreated. The ryots of the village began thinking that the Harijans had entered the village only because Chandrasekharam had incited them, causing the death of the bull and the arrival of the Special Police which had caused trouble all round. Such dreadful events occurred, they thought, whenever group rivalries broke out. "The case between Pullayya and Chandrasekharam pertains only to them. But Chandrasekharam's behaviour in particular is damaging to the village," they thought and stopped sympathising with him. They feared that helping him would mean inviting trouble. Next, the Malas, the Madigas and others had been frightened by the police's show of strength and they thought that it was dangerous — and not at all useful — to follow Chandrasekharam, and so they deserted him. Thus Chandrasekharam became isolated.

Once again it was time for the hearing. Chandrasekharam's fears — about having no support at all — increased. He needed witnesses. It was useless to rely on the witnesses of his village. His suspicion that the whole village had ranged against him strengthened.

Lying back in bed one night, he began thinking. The more he thought the more certain it appeared that signing the IOU had been done in a hotel room. He recalled that he, Pullayya and Madhavayya had been drinking coffee and had lit cheroots. It was not recalling at all: the scene appeared before his eyes as if it was happening that day! He heard those voices. Pullayya was puffing smoke like the chimney of a mill. Were there only three at that time? No, there certainly was another. Chandrasekharam wanted it to be so. Therefore he firmly believed in it. Who was that fourth person?

And presently he told Lalitha about this. She was very

happy and encouraged him to think hard to recollect the details. Chandrasekharam also longed to remember the details. At last he thought that it might have been Nagendram. Yes, it *was* Nagendram. And so he said to Lalitha. She became ecstatic and felt as if someone had come back to life. "Where is he from? What is he?" she asked him. Nagendram had been his fellow student and he was in the tobacco business, he told her. "Then why do you hesitate? Present him as a witness," she told him. "He is now in England, how can he come?" He muttered to himself so that Lalitha could hear him. He must have referred to this matter in his letters. He opened the bundles of letters and scanned them for a reference. He also asked his wife to search for it, but she couldn't find it either. "Probably the reference might be in one of the letters in this bundle. I have troubled you needlessly. Go and carry on with your work. I shall search for it," he said and took the bundle of letters to another room and closed the door. He was absorbed in examining the letters.

Lalitha had to run all kinds of errands. Finally, one evening Chandrasekharam, pushing open the doors of the room, cried out, "Lalitha, Lalitha!"

"Have you found it?" Lalitha asked.

"Here! This! Here! Written by himself. In his own hand. Look at this signature." Chandrasekharam passed the letter to her. Holding it and trembling with anxiety she read it hastily in a choked voice. All the things that had happened in the hotel room two years ago were mentioned in detail. Lalitha could not control her joy. She heartily kissed the child nearby and exclaimed, "My dora babu, what does it matter if you have no property? It's enough if we have our reputation and prestige." But she opened the letter once again and examined it. She shuddered all over. Was there some resemblance to her husband's handwriting? She stared at him. But she could not speak. "If this was introduced in court, it would be quite enough. Other proofs wouldn't be necessary," he said. "O God, how many difficulties are you getting us into?" she thought. The whole world reeled about her. Every act of her husband's appeared dubious. And murky with sin. Unbearable.

ble! He was innocent; he had to be. She didn't wish to look at the letter again: there was no need at all: she wouldn't. Smiling softly, she returned the paper to her husband, asking him to keep it safe, as it might be of some help in the case.

That night she pleaded with her husband, "Don't write to the papers. Why do you write how Ammayamma garu and Sastri garu have treated us? What can it do, except degrade us?"

"It's not that. It's necessary that everyone should know. Especially the judge," Chandrasekharam convinced his wife. Lalitha didn't refer to the matter again.

TWENTY-NINE

Ramarao was sent directly to the detention camp by the Government. On his arrival his cell-mate browsed through all his books and found the works of John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Whitehead, Sri Aurobindo, Popper, Mannerhiem, Laski, Croce and others.

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"Are you a member of the communist party?" he asked.

"No," Ramarao replied laconically.

"Your books certainly say so. But then what brings you here?"

"That's what I am unable to understand. Perhaps they have sent me here because they are angry that I haven't been doing anything."

"You are Ramarao¹?"

"Yes, how do you know?"

"Your very face proclaims it."

Ramarao was surprised at the display of such affection, though he had arrived there but a while ago. He scrutinised the other to see if he was someone familiar. He could recollect nothing of the sort. He hadn't seen him at all before, it seemed. His behaviour was incomprehensible. Perhaps his was such a nature. Ramarao was silent thinking that there was

no point in annoying the other and regretting it later. A while later he was questioned again. "How much did your people offer the officers?"

Ramarao could not make head or tail of the question. "What do you mean?"

"To take you in as a detainee. Haven't you understood even now?"

"No, my brain is as impervious as black cotton soil. If your questions are more elaborate, I might be able to satisfy your curiosity."

"I mean, for not charging you with a crime and taking you as a detainee."

"If you had asked me thus, I would have explained without putting you to so much trouble," Ramarao laughed aloud. All right. Can you tell me now?"

"Ten thousand."

"Ten thousand! Don't joke, tell me the truth."

"What do we care if ten thousand is lost to escape hanging? Besides, I am my father's only surviving son. Our property is valued at two lakh rupees. What does ten thousand matter?"

"What is it you have done?"

"O, it is a Bharatham². I will tell you if you have the patience to listen."

"I've been asking only because I wish to know."

Ramarao began:

At the beginning of my story, I was in town, studying. I was living in Triplicane. No use asking for street or door number. Across the road, opposite my room, there stood a Chettiar's two-storeyed mansion. The Chettiar, his son, daughter-in-law and servant-maid lived in that house. Though the building was very big, they did not let it out to anyone.

The father was about seventy. The son, who was about fifty, had taken a second wife. We didn't know what business he did, but he was out on tour twenty days in a month. The father stayed home guarding the house. No, guarding his daughter-in-law carefully.

Ammal was young, and couldn't have been more than

twenty or twenty-two. She had no bonds of any sort, no worries and no children. She was taller than me by a handspan and looked like she ate well. I can't say she was an apsara³, but she *was* beautiful, at least to me. I happened to see her once. I thought I was a bit disturbed — because the letters in the book before me became illegible. Many times in the bazaar I escaped being run over by a hair's breadth. How long could I be subjected to these accidents? I decided that these conditions should not continue but what was the use? How could I get acquainted with her? This old devil used to sit unblinking, on perpetual guard. Each bird had to remain in its own nest.

That night, unable to sleep, I went to a late-night cinema. Though I went, could I see any figure on the screen? Somehow after the show I walked down to my room, but I didn't wish to go in. My legs drew me to Ammal's house. Gently, I opened the gate and closed it behind me. Then I went to the backyard. There was a balcony above and her room opened into it. That was all I knew. A stout creeper twining sturdily around a pillar wound up to the balcony. With its help I somehow reached the balcony and slowly went to her door. Whether it was good fortune or bad, the door was not locked. Pushing it open, I entered.

That was the beginning of our relationship. When Chettiar was on tour, my nights were spent in that room. I don't know how he suspected it, but the old man once came into the room while I was there. He raged with anger on seeing me. My legs shook in fear and I stood there confused. He hit me on the head with his walking stick. Later when I became conscious, I found myself in a room with no way out. Why had I come to town? And what wretched condition was I in? How could I move about normally thereafter? What should I explain to the people at home? Lost in thought, I slept there.

Some time during the night, hearing the sound of the door opening, I sat up. Ammal came groping in the dark and sat next to me. There was no end to my wonder. But I controlled it and questioned her. Without batting an eyelid, she told me that the old man was dead. What a great comfort if the

right person dies at the right time! I asked her how he had died. "He died, that's all," she replied. I guessed the rest and, shaken, asked her, "What should be done now?" "Cremation. And — it should be over before he comes back." She replied, "Aren't there any relations or friends in the town?" I asked anxiously. "No need to worry," she assured me. The next morning the old man was cremated. As he was old and as there were neither relations nor friends nor foes, no one suspected anything. No one knew how far away Chettiar was and what he was doing. Before he arrived, Ammal performed all the funeral rites. I watched her with wide-eyed amazement.

Once the riots were over, I camped in the big building itself. My food, drink and other comforts were taken care of there. The neighbours began whispering. But in a big town who worries about another's matters? Soon, a month passed by.

In the midst of our bliss one night, we heard the sound of chappals on the staircase.

"Haven't you closed the doors?"

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"He has all the keys with him." I was alarmed, got up hastily and put on my dhoti and shirt hanging on the peg. Observing my haste, Ammal smiled silently. She bolted the door without making a noise. Silently, opening the door leading to the balcony, she hid me behind the flowerpots and lay on the bed. I could hear everything, even the creeping of an ant.

As he came to the door, I could even hear him holding his breath. After a while he knocked on the door.

"Who is there?" Ammal asked, as if she had just woken up.

"It's me, open the door."

"Who is *me*?"

"Me, don't you know? Why don't you open the door?"

Ammal got up, yawned loudly and stretched her body ostentatiously. I was able to hear her doing that. She opened the door. He probably looked around the room. Opening the window on the south, he looked out.

"Why do you look out of the window? I haven't hidden anyone there."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"How many days ago did the old man die?"

"Twenty."

"What did he die of?"

"Nothing. He was lying dead in his bed when I saw him in the morning."

"Is that so? How mysterious."

"Where's the mystery? How long do the old live?"

"Oh, things seem to have gone too far. Mind your words. Go and fetch water to wash my feet."

"It's clear enough who should be careful."

Ammal came out through the inner door, signalled cautiously to me and gave him water.

"Who is this second bed for?" he asked her sternly.

"For whom? For you. Who knows when dora will arrive?" she said dauntlessly.

"What is this?"

"Can't you see it: underwear. Mine."

"The neighbours talk about nothing else."

"What do they say?"

"Why are you in a hurry? Everything will come out at the right time."

"Why at some other time? It can be settled right now. Whose name did they sting your ear with?"

"Will it be a festival as soon as the house floor is washed with cowdung? Just tether the horse for now."

"Why at some other time? Settle it now itself. Ramu, Ramu!"

She dragged me in by the hand. He was petrified and slumped in a chair by the cot. He never imagined that she could be so audacious. Stunned, he sat watching silently.

"Here, he has come. Who else do you want? Ask him. Why are you silent?" He did not speak. Ammal was rolling on the bed, laughing till her tummy swelled. Restraining herself, she said, "Ramu, come here. Why do you stand there? It seems he has heard somebody whispering something. Why only hear? Better if he sees with his own eyes. Come here," and stretched out her arms. She was like a lake in a storm. I

couldn't see any other world. I embraced her, kissing her on the cheek. Just then she got a terrible whack on her other cheek. She slowly pushed me aside. Her face flushed with fury. Her lips were quivering. Her eyes blazed with anger. Her chest was heaving. Springing from the bed like a dart, she twisted the paitakongu around and tucked it at the waist.

"Just do that again!"

He panicked. In a moment he comprehended the situation. Before he was able to rush towards the door, Ammal closed and bolted it. He dashed towards the door leading to the balcony and was trying to unbolt it. At once she jumped on him and gripping his throat with both hands began to squeeze hard. He never even dreamed that his wife would do something like this. His fists clenched but not in self defence. She pushed him down on the floor and continuing to press his throat, beckoned to me. I jumped up and sat on his chest, pinning his hands down with my knees. He lunged at me, gripping my head with his forearms, his teeth at my throat. If only another two minutes had passed, I don't know who would have narrated this story. But, with the blow Ammal gave him on the head with an iron hammer, he slumped limply releasing my throat. I got up. By the time I regained my breath, I comprehended the situation. Shivering, I looked at her. But one glance at her bloodshot looks, my fear vanished. Both of us quietly carried the dead body to the backyard and buried it beside a heap of garbage. We covered the freshly turned earth with rubbish so that it couldn't be seen, loaded stones and other trash on it to prevent the soil from being disturbed.

Returning, she cleaned the bloodstains in the room, on the staircase and in the house with water, mopping it all up with a rag so that nothing would show. Four days passed. We went to bed. After four days we don't know how the police sensed it, but they did. That's how I came here."

"Is all this true?" his cell-mate asked him in astonishment.

"If what the Russian novelists write is true, so is this."

"Then you cannot stay with us. Do you understand?"

"Is that so? Then why has the government dumped me here?"

"That won't do. We won't allow a criminal to stay with us. We are political prisoners. Pack your things."

"All right, I'll go wherever I am asked to. I can't choose."

The cell-mate talked with the other detenues. Trouble began to brew in that centre. Ramarao smiled to himself. No one was on speaking terms with him nor did anyone help him in any way. He too affected indifference. His behaviour further annoyed the others. They sent in a petition to the higher authorities. Ramarao was a criminal, not a political prisoner at all. So such a person's presence degraded them. They clearly said that unless he was sent to another jail, they would go on a hunger strike. An agitation seemed imminent. One day the jailor came running to him.

"So you are a criminal?"

"If so, the government could prosecute and punish me, couldn't it? Why all this fuss?"

"That is the problem with you political prisoners. If we don't listen to you, we will have trouble with you, and if we do, we will have trouble with the higher authorities. Why this bother? I will sent you to a separate block."

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"Won't the same trouble start there?"

"There is nobody there."

"Does that mean solitary confinement?"

"When hundreds of people are clamouring, what can we do?"

"So dharma is decided by a head count."

"There's no use arguing with you. Pack your things." The officer went away. Ramarao was put in solitary confinement. For a day or two, he felt happy to be free of the other detenues. But how long can one live alone without communicating with others? For a while, he managed with his books. Then, a minute passed like an epoch. Unconsciously, a desire stirred in his mind that he should somehow escape from that cell. With this his former determination weakened a bit. Perhaps his father had never stood guarantee to Chandrasekaram. What his father told him the other day might be an untruth, or perhaps he had dreamt that his father had spoken these words. Sita said that he was raving in his sleep. So did

Lakshmmamma. Really, where was the need to lie? They might lie to others for the sake of father. But why did they have to lie to him? "Don't raise this topic anywhere," they could have said, if it was for father. But they didn't say so. "You are prattling in your sleep," said Sita. There was no chance for her to prompt mother to say so. How did Sita know that he would speak in this way? Nor did his mother, for that matter. And yet she too used precisely the same words. Even father said the same thing. Was there any chance for so many to agree to use the same words? It was possible that he might have been mistaken.

Ramarao trembled at what was surely his mistake. What he had done was to betray his family. All his efforts were futile. Why should he undergo this punishment of solitary confinement? Had he till now been imagining something and doing something else? He was not ready to accept this. Then he thought about Satyanarayana Pantulu who knew all about Pullayya's transactions. It was impossible for him not to have known about Chandrasekharam's affair. Asking Pantulu would have settled the matter long ago. Why hadn't it occurred to him? He was surprised.

At least now this could be settled, he thought. He could immediately write a letter and have it posted in which he asked Satyanarayana Pantulu to inform him about the affair.

Just after he sent the letter, a suspicion bloomed. Satyanarayana Pantulu was his father's clerk. Though the truth was known, was there a rule that he should reveal it? If his father came to know that he had revealed the truth, would Satyanarayana Pantulu be allowed to continue in his service? No, it was useless. Both his sister and mother expressed their prejudice in favour of his father. And it was clear enough how frail the human mind was: a lie repeated ten times, or by a couple of people, begins to be true. Wasn't this what Chapatkin elucidated in his book, *Rape of the Masses*. Suppose what so many people were saying was true, why did he remember his father saying those same words? What had he against his father? Had he lied to him that day? There had been no need. It would have been better, if he hadn't written the letter to

Satyanarayana Pantulu. Was it any good making family affairs known to all? But what was the use when it had slipped out of his hands? Still he should wait and see what reply he would receive, he thought.

THIRTY

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Though there were many patients in the clinic, the doctor dispensed medicines to all of them patiently, without any display of annoyance. Mallayya's son sat curled up in a corner. Not noticing him, the doctor settled in an easy-chair and lit a cigarette.

"Yemandoi, doctor garu! You seem to have forgotten me. What justice is this? I was the first to come, but you have kept me waiting till the end."

"Did I ask you to sit unseen in that corner behind the almirah? All right, come here. What's wrong?"

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Just then Padma arrived, carrying her youngest son in her arms. The doctor immediately rose and showed her to a bench. She looked around hesitantly.

"There is no one else. Be seated," he told her.

"Won't you deal with me first?" Mallayya's son reminded him. The doctor took him to an adjacent room. Padma was able to hear their conversation.

"Sir, why are people born at all?"

"You seem to be full of chatter. What's the problem?"

"It seems Sekharam garu was sentenced to three years in prison yesterday."

"No one mentioned this," the doctor was surprised. Then he continued, "Now, how... how does that concern you? Tell me what's wrong with you?" He sounded impatient and harsh.

"I can't breathe at night ... bouts of coughing. Doctor garu, sometimes I feel it would be better to be dead."

"Cha! Why are you blabbering like this? You are not even

a span high and have yet to experience so many things. What sort of thinking is this?"

"What's the use of living?"

"Shut up. Eat well and study. Play happily. Don't act like an imbecile. There is nothing that man can't achieve in the world. When you grow older you will understand everything. Pull up your shirt and take a couple of deep breaths... turn to the other side ... all right, when you come tomorrow, bring a urine sample in a small bottle. We need to send a blood sample for examination. Tell your father that I have asked him to give you ten rupees. And bring that money. If he tries to put off giving you the money, speak to him firmly and get it. Take this tablet before you sleep. Don't worry, am I not here to look after you? Now you may go."

Mallayya's son opened the door and came out. Padma went in, taking the boy with her.

"How is the new house?" the doctor asked.

"How do you think it is? It's all right," she replied, her head bowed.

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"We don't see Satyanarayana anywhere."

"He never leaves the house."

"Why? Is he not well? If so, why haven't you sent for me?" asked the doctor, crossly.

"I don't know. He won't accept advice either."

"It's always so. When the disease becomes worse, they come and trouble me." The doctor led the boy to the table. He pressed his stomach and examined him with the stethoscope. The doctor stuck his tongue out, made faces at him, and the boy did the same. Padma stood watching all this.

"Nothing wrong with him. Why have you brought him?"

"No... not him." With her head bent she was scratching the floor with her toe.

"Then... are you ill?" he asked in surprise.

Padma had put on a bit of weight. Her palms and soles were an attractive pink. Her skin glowed like gold, while her eyes glittered with an uncommon light.

"What's wrong?"

"No appetite... continuous salivation...."

She lay down on the bench when the doctor asked her to. He examined her, and laughing, said, "No medicine is necessary. In two or three months everything will be all right."

"Is that it?" she said, losing all hope.

"Aray Kistai¹, do you want a sister or a brother?"

"I want only my mother," said the boy.

"Aray rascal, your mother will be there, but do you want a sister or a brother?"

"No one, only my mother."

"Cha, don't say that." Laughing, the doctor flicked the boy's cheek with his fingers.

As Padma turned her face aside, the doctor was reminded of Sakuntala² lost in thoughts of Dushyanta. Sakuntala may not have been so ravishingly beautiful: there was no tiny mole on *her* chin. If she had, would Kalidasa have left it out?

"So you say this is true."

"Can there be any doubt?"

"Doctor garu — this cannot be. This should never be." Padma got off the table. The doctor was unable to speak.

"I don't want this. Can't you help me at all. We are already so hard up. In addition, another delivery?"

"I'll talk to Satyanarayana and then think about it."

"He doesn't know. He shouldn't."

The doctor was astounded. He looked her over. Her face turned red. Tears streamed from her eyes. He thought he was dreaming. Never did he imagine that she would do such a thing. He remembered the sharp look she had given him once. Padma, with her nature — would she do something like this? Impossible. His diagnosis must be wrong. If it was, then his knowledge had to be wrong. What he had been practising all these days was not medicine but jugglery, deception of the world. Which of these was to be believed?

Krishnudu, dragging the stethoscope, pattered towards the hall in the fore part of the building. Padma suddenly fell at Vasudeva Sastri's feet. "Doctor garu, a great mistake has been committed. An error that should not have been committed has been made, it's true. I am not fit to face either him or you. But my destiny is an obstinate one. Else, I should have died

a fortnight ago. But when I am fated to suffer such humiliation and appear in such a mean light, why would I die? Last night I went up to the well. But the two children appeared to be wailing, 'amma, amma.' For their sake I wanted to turn back, but my heart was unwilling. I climbed the parapet. The likeness of your face appeared in the well. I seemed to hear a voice, 'No, don't. Stop. He has a kind heart and will surely help you, show you a way.' Immediately I was seized with a doubt. He is a pure flame and only a flame can bear his purity. I thought that this pit of sin was not for me. But the image I saw in the water has deceived me. I couldn't predict this. Doctor garu, you needn't help me nor do I want help. But forget I ever told you anything. Consider that I haven't visited you at all. Your word is enough, I want nothing more than this. Doctor garu, doctor garu, why don't you speak? Can't you help me at least to this extent?"

The doctor did not speak. She rose and wiped her face with the hem of her saree so hard that her face flushed a deep red. 'Aray Krishna, come let us go,' she called out and hastened out of the room.

"Padma, stop!"

Paying no heed to him, she continued moving. In one bound he reached the door and stopped her. She glowered at him.

"What do you mean to do?"

"And you?"

"What else? 'Look what your wife has done?' you want to fetch him and give me over to him, isn't that the grand deed you want to perform? What wickedness! So what if a happy family is ruined, if happy lives are sacrificed? Dharma wins. You can proclaim your greatness and parade like a warrior. What more does one want? You've helped quite a lot so far. Can't you understand what I'm saying?"

"Hold your tongue! Do you know you are talking to?"

"Don't I know? I do. I am talking to a destroyer of families."

"Whose family have I broken up?" He gnashed his teeth savagely.

"Who has ruined my family? Wasn't it you? Otherwise, why should I come to such a fate?"

The doctor slapped her with all his might. She was flung on to the door by the side, the impact making her cheek swell within moments. With that his anger subsided. He slumped down.

"Is this true?" He asked abjectly.

Padma closed the door and sat in a chair.

"How good it would be if you were to stab me with a dagger! All this is untrue. You are jealous of me. You don't want me to be pure, so you are dragging me down to hell along with you. It's not merely that. What you said a while ago was a lie. You said that only to vex me, to find out how I would respond. That's all, there is nothing else. In fact there is no problem. Isn't it that, isn't it only that?"

The doctor's hands were touching her feet. Her hands were ruffling his hair.

"How good it would be if all this were a dream?"

"Isn't this a dream? Am I not the cause of all this?"

"You still doubt my word. How can I convince you? All right, I am slandering you, dragging you down to hell along with me, as you said. All that I said was a lie. Now, forget it, my life is ruined anyway, why should I ruin yours too? Why should I destroy your happiness? Why should I drag you out into the public eye and spoil your name? It's my fault. I made this mistake, but you know nothing, really nothing. Doctor garu, may you be happy and your dharama flourish! I shall now take leave of you, but a suspicious growth is never safe. It can bring harm in this manner." The doctor was dazed, he could not see the room or Padma. In attempting to stand up he stumbled heavily and would have fallen flat, had not Padma held him. She gently lowered him to the floor.

"So the dream about the coffee cup I told you was not a lie."

"No."

Five minutes passed. Padma prepared to go. "Padma ... Padma" slowly he stood up and held her hands as she stood, head bowed.

"Don't be in a hurry, let me think. Let's wait two days. By tomorrow evening, I'll think of some way. Promise me that much, that's enough. I don't want anything else nor would I ask for more that's for certain. Why don't you say something? Yes, talking with this vile person is a sin. Enough of what has happened. Why more? No, not that. Promise me that you'll heed this one wish of mine." He extended his hand to her with a dejected look. She placed her hand in his and left without glancing at his face, taking her child along with her.

The doctor walked slowly into the hall and sank into the chair. He could see Satyanarayana Pantulu's image before him. "Would you betray a friend who trusts you? Will you ruin me, my children, my wife and my family?" he appeared to be saying. He felt that the whole village was laughing at him. Ammayamma garu, throwing up her hands in a scandalised gesture, seemed to be asserting, "These people never change. The public are deceived by their outward appearance and their words. Such people need to be carefully watched. I thought that Padma was above suspicion. With her easy virtue, she has personally wrecked her family. With two children, we should condemn her for developing this blister of wantonness. Anyway, she has so completely torn assunder Pantulu's house. Is this why the doctor sheltered Pantulu? If he knew what sort of a person you were, would he have stepped into your wretched house?"

Pullayya's affair also flashed into his mind. Pullayya seemed to be sneering at him. "What, doctor! What's new? Weren't you suspecting me of something? Weren't you imagining that I've treated Chandrasekharam and his family unjustly, stealing his five thousand rupees and sending him to prison? Well, what have you done? You are killing Padma rendering Panthulu's children motherless. You've completely destroyed his reputation and fame. Perhaps he too may die, unable to bear this shame, which means that you'd have taken two lives. Are your actions less harmful than mine? Unlike you, I've never claimed that I'm an embodiment of justice, nor did I even entertain such conceit. You ask if you have done this intentionally. That's right, but tell me what difference there is in

the result between a conscious deed and an unconscious one? Is the injury you've caused any less than the one I have?" He seemed to hear a burst of laughter. The doctor bounded out of the chair.

The whole world appeared to be pervaded by dense gloom. The tapas³ he had intended to perform was shattered. His ideals were rooted out. Why should he live? How true were the words of Mallayya's son? Wasn't death better than this repugnant life? He rose slowly and went to the main door to bolt it. Taking down a thick cotton cord from the top of the almirah, he tied a knot to a beam in the roof and pulled it tight. The shutters of the two windows facing the pyols in the street were open. He crept towards the windows quietly and closed the shutters. The shutters and windows facing the backyard were closed and the hall was so dark that he couldn't see the rope he had tied. Moreover, after he was dead, how could the body be removed? Why should his death cause his neighbours any inconvenience? He groped towards the back door and opened it. Dragging a chair and placing it beneath the rope, he climbed it to see if he could reach the noose, and found out that he could. Then it occurred to him that death by hanging was awful. Since the end was not instantaneous, one might take hours to die. And those who found the corpse would find it gruesome. Being a doctor why should he choose such a macabre end, when there was, wasn't there, an easier way? Quickly untying the rope from the beam, he put it back in its usual place, and restored the chair to its position. Then, opening the shutters of the windows that opened into the street and returning, retrieved the cyanide bottle carefully hidden inside the almirah. Seated, he raised the bottle to pour its contents into his mouth.

Padma rushed into the street of his mind. Both her children were holding her hands, dragging her back and howling, though she was not listening to them. "Doctor, doctor! What is to happen to me? Are you seeking your own escape? What did you assure me? Having sent me away with a promise is this what you are doing now? Isn't this betrayal? Not even a in a dream did I imagine that you were such a person,"

he felt her saying. He shuddered and got up to hide the cyanide in its place. Locking the door of his house, he went out.

His legs carried him along. Though cloudy, the sun was hot. Somebody greeted him on the way.

"Doctor garu, where are you going in this noon-day sun? Couldn't you have hired a cart? Appalaswamy's cart has just gone to the village. Stand here in this shade and I shall send it in a moment."

Vasudeva Sastri once again came back to his senses. The man who greeted him — Kusalayya — was fetching some provisions from the town, his whole body drenched in sweat. How guileless was that life! How unsullied! How blessed! Having studied so much and acquired such vast knowledge, what was he himself doing? He was wallowing in the mire of sin. Chi, chi! Is this learning? Was his knowledge useful only for this? What did it matter how much money one had, or how much authority, or how cultivated one was? People like himself, Vasudeva Sastri, did not even deserve to sprinkle on his head the water that Kusalayya hallowed by washing his feet in it.

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"Kusalu, don't. Don't send Appalaswamy," he said and continued walking, his head bowed. Then he understood that he was tramping towards the town. Why was he going and what did he have to do there? Though it puzzled him, he kept wailing silently.

Suppose he killed himself? That would be laying everything bare to Satyanarayana Pantulu who had been in the dark till now. If he knew, would he allow Padma to live? His nature was different. He would not be able to pardon that mistake. He would tear her apart. He might even attempt to kill himself. What then would be the fate of the children? He could not envisage the consequences. He might not attempt suicide, but the chances of their living happily were remote. Padma's life would become unbearable. That should not happen so long as he was alive. He wouldn't be able to hear it.

What if he approached Satyanarayana Pantulu with the truth and asked his pardon? Would he be able to forgive him? He could not harm him in any way. Even if Sastri assured him

that he would leave the village, Pantulu would not be able to pardon Padma. Her life would become a living hell. Alternatively, he could marry her. In which case he could not stay in the village. The two children would have to be taken along. Then he would have to end the social service which had been his ideal all along and get used to a new way of life. Wasn't it better than the hypocritical impure life in which precept was different from practice? Yes, there was no way better than this.

He slowed down.

But Padma should agree to this and take a risk. Would she do it? If such were her intentions, why would she ask that her pregnancy be terminated? No she was not in love with him. That night in a fit of passion she had erred. That was why she did not even come near him. She had done the same thing the next day, but never afterwards. When the police beat him, she had wept. If she really did not love him at all, why would she weep? Probably out of pity. Was there any evidence to disprove it? No, she bore him no love, only desire and affection. Else, she would not have come to him to explain the situation and seek his help.

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He stood in the shade of the tree drying the perspiration that soaked his body. Then he sat on a stone that marked a furlong.

Perhaps she might not be willing to come away with him. Then what was he to do? He should do what she wanted. He should not, at any cost, stay in the village. Seeing the faces of the villagers again was impossible, unbearable. But how could this be settled in advance? Only after talking to her could a decision be taken.

The doctor returned home. Exhausted by the heat of the sun, he lay down as in a swoon. That evening, those who came for treatment returned empty handed. It was the third time in all those years that the doctor seemed unwell. Many came to enquire after him — he somehow got rid of them and closing the door went to bed. He could not sleep that night.

The next day as usual he dispensed medicine to the patients who saw nothing different in him except his bloodshot

eyes. After they had gone away, he had a bite or two and sat with a book before him. But his mind wandered unable to focus on what he was reading. He remembered Chandrasekharam's family. He should have gone to enquire about them the previous day itself. How careless of him! Like him Lalitha too had no relatives in the village. Her father had died in such a manner and her bother had left for the Nizam territory. Who would inquire after her? Who would comfort her? What sin had Lalitha committed? Really, it appeared that Chandrasekharam might not have done anything wrong either. Why believe that dharma would always win in this world? No, that was a blind belief. Only might wins — either physical or financial or social, but not the might of dharma. Chi! it was wrong to believe that there was a hell other than the world they inhabited.

In the heat of that noonday sun he went straight to Chandrasekharam's house. Lalitha was lying in bed with her daughter seated by her. As soon as he went in, Lalitha began weeping inconsolably. Tears filled his eyes too. But he turned his face aside. Somehow, he tried to comfort her. As he was leaving he instructed her, "Ammmai, whatever you need send the daughter to me. Don't hesitate. Don't imagine that I am different from your father. As long as I stay in the village, I'll continue to visit you." He could not understand why men stabbed each other this way! In such a world what was there he could do? Even if he did, how far would it be fruitful? Would men ever be free?

He had to forget his present state. Using this occasion, he tried to suppress his own anxiety and sorrow by extending comfort to another. Again at four he opened his clinic. Finding his own company unbearable, he made small talk with those who had come. It all looked quite normal to the patients, nothing out of the way.

It grew dark. He lit the lantern and hung it on a hook in the hall. The hour to settle Padma's matter would end by that evening. He didn't recall having told her who would meet whom where. What an oversight! Suppose he went to Satyanarayana Panthulu's house? That would lead to needless

suspicion. Would she come? It was a big question. He didn't know what to do. He sat staring at the door, so tense that even the sound of an ant creeping by seemed to startle him. He didn't know when he fell asleep. Opening his eyes in consternation, he saw Padma before him.

"When did you arrive?"

"Just now."

"Why are you standing? Sit here." The doctor rose from his chair and made her sit in it. For a while neither spoke. Very hesitantly, Vasudeva Sastri began to speak.

"I shall personally go to Satyanarayana Pantulu and tell him that I have committed a sin. Why are you afraid? Let me finish. 'It's impossible for Padma to stay with you. She is in love with me. Then what happiness will you get in Padma's company? If you agree, both of us will leave for some town. You'll be happy, and so will Padma,' I'll tell him that. What do you say?"

Padma was silent with shock. He misunderstood her silence.

"Then you don't love me at all? I was good only for the occasion. Is that it?"

"No! How can I express the respect and attachment I have for you! How can these be settled with mere words?" her eyes filled with tears.

"If that is so, what objection can you have to my plan?"

"He cannot agree. He won't, while he's alive. He would strangle me at once. Even that is not a problem, but he too will die. And I can't bear that. It'll orphan the children."

"Then we need not tell him. Prepare to leave tonight. I'll write a letter later."

"What about the children?"

"Bring them with you."

Padma was silent. Each moment of that silence appeared to the doctor like a Brahmakalpa, like aeons passing by. Finally she said, "No, I can't do it. Just thinking about it breaks my heart. If I come away what will happen to him? His life will be as empty as a cave. He will be the butt of ridicule because of me. Though they may say nothing to his face, the

women'll gossip scandalously behind his back. I known his nature. He won't be able to bear this humiliation. He'll jump into some well or pit. Then, will the world spare me? 'Even after bearing two children, she walked out on Pantulu recklessly. May her life be a bed of live coals — that impudent shameless slut,' that's what they'll say. Nor will they spare me in my new location. A woman who eloped, they'll label me. Thereafter, my life will be the talk of the streets. Doctor, permit me to live like this. I lack the courage."

Vasudeva Sastri scowled. He looked closely at Padma. Suddenly he rose and went to his store of medicines. He fetched an item and gave it to her wordlessly. She stood there without moving.

"You have got what you wanted, haven't you? Leave now, and quickly," he suddenly turned back.

"Angry?"

"Why? What authority have I to get angry? You are shaping your life in whatever way you like. Who am I to prevent it? Go away, Padma, go. Your husband, you and your children — may you be happy. What more can I do? What more can I wish? This land of Bharat which has given birth to you is fortunate. Your role models, Sita and Rama, are blessed. Go away, Padma. Please leave. My home is a hellish pit. And my heart is a mire of sin. Don't stay here another moment. Go away."

His eyes flashed fire and in his words flew daggers. Padma was unable to stand there. He pushed her out and slammed the door. Was it for these people who wallow in bat-droppings while boasting about musk that he had been squeezing his heart out? He loathed himself. He couldn't stand another moment in this abyss. He packed his hold-all quickly and had Appalaswamy bring the cart round. He left that very night.

The next day those who came seeking treatment were astonished to find the clinic locked. They asked each other where the doctor had gone. At last Appalaswamy told them that the doctor had taken the train to town. It became the talk of the village. But no one knew why the doctor had left. Indeed, no one possibly could.

Till Chandrasekharam was actually sentenced, Satyanarayana Pantulu had never expected that Pullayya would commit such an atrocity. Until the last minute, he expected Pullayya to withdraw his case, but he never dreamt that things would take such a turn. Once, when Chandrasekharam had come to plead with him, he had stood firm only out of loyalty to Pullayya and with no evil intention. Ultimately when the court pronounced its judgement and Chandrasekharam was being whisked away by the police, Satyanarayana Pantulu smouldered silently with grief. He was greatly agitated that he had consciously been responsible for Chandrasekharam being handcuffed and his family being put to untold misery.

The quarrel between Pullayya and Chandrasekharam till then, he thought, was like the war of the *Mahabharatha* with his role paralleling Dronacharya's. But he hadn't expected the complete success of adharma. In fact, Drona passed away without witnessing the consequences. But he... he was witnessing the triumph of adharma and had never suspected that he would have to face such a problem. With that he felt that being alive itself was loathsome. What purushartha¹ had he left to achieve in life except, perhaps, the accumulation of further similar sins. He stopped going to Pullayya's house. Pullayya too didn't enquire about his absence, an indifference that was like a sharp, red hot crowbar in his heart. Any laughter in the bazaar seemed to be directed at him. When people gathered at the rachchabanda or the library, he assumed that they were referring to the injustice he had perpetrated. Whenever he dozed off, Chandrasekharam would appear in his dream saying, "See, Pantulu, what you have done! You a Brahmin! Why did you act so unjustly? You made me wear these manacles. With your blessings, the jail authorities are breaking my

back. Look! Lalitha is bedridden and the children, hair dishevelled are begging at every house, weeping. Aren't these the blessings of your words?" Satyanarayana Pantulu spent disturbed nights, waking with a start and when Padma questioned him, he would say that nothing was the matter.

Not yet thirty, Satyanarayana Pantulu's hair began to grey. He remembered the words the doctor had said that night, "Pantulu, times have changed. We can live in society only if we behave prudently. Otherwise, we'll be destroyed without a trace." Someone had set his house on fire only because he was on Pullayya's side forcing him to seek refuge in the doctor's house. He had become even more indebted when Pullayya had had a new house built for him. This now meant that he had involuntarily partaken in Pullayya's good deeds and sins. When would he be free of these bonds? He would give up working with Pullayya. What should he do next? In what way were the other wealthy people in the village any the less? In a way, Pullayya was better. To come out of this pit of sin, it was better to stop working in the village. How could he maintain the family, if he stopped working? How about shifting to the town? What kind of work could he do there? He had no degree and knew nothing about the occupations of the day. How would he live? He saw no way out. The saying, "He who sows seeds will not forget to water them," appeared meaningless.

Her husband's anxiety didn't go unnoticed by Padma. Pushed along as she was in the current of her own troubles, she could give him no support. In fact he who is happy can sympathise with others who are suffering, but one who is himself sunk in woe can hardly have any compassion to spare for those in difficulties. Moreover, mutual hatred might increase. In the case of Padma and Satyanarayana Pantulu, similar incidents began occurring. "How can we get on if the paddy is not husked?" said Padma once to her elder son in her husband's hearing.

"Couldn't you tell me that directly?" asked Satyanarayana Pantulu in an annoyed tone.

Another day, the elder son told her that his name would

be removed from the school rolls if the required fee was not paid. "The world won't drown. You too can sit like a maharaja, hands clasped," she remarked, hearing which, Satyanarayana Pantulu seated on the pyol, frowned at her angrily. Another day, the vegetable vendor adamantly demanded the half rupee they owed him. "I'll pay you, Bapulu, when you come tomorrow," she pleaded with him and sent him away. "For the sake of the children the kitchen fire has to be lit in this house. Otherwise, it isn't as if there are no wells in the village," she spoke in a disgusted voice in her husband's hearing.

Unable to stay at home, Satyanarayana Pantulu set off for the library. On the way the postman handed him a letter which he eagerly opened. The letter was from Ramarao. He read it again, a second time. All along, he had assumed that the truth was known only to Chandrasekharam, Pullayya and himself and to no one else. From this letter it appeared that Ramarao also knew the facts. If he was writing to him to point out the truth, Ramarao must have been aware that Pantulu was guilty of the sin of silence when he should have spoken up. He had never, till now, imagined that he would have to suffer such ignominy before others. Now what would his life be? Ramarao was actually ten years younger than him. By winning the case, his father and he would benefit. Despite this, Ramarao had chosen to stand alone on the side of dharma, renouncing all familial affection. Afraid that he would tender evidence on Chandrasekharam's behalf, Pullayya might have handed his son over to the police. Who else in the village would want him arrested? Moreover, Ramarao wouldn't meddle in other peoples' affairs, would he? Surely, this must be Pullayya's handiwork. What flagrant atrocity! And he, Pantulu, had stood by such a person. Had he been firm, would Pullayya have done what he did? No, it would never have happened. Influenced by his past friendship with Pullayya and his own livelihood, he had remained silent. When an innocent being was cruelly punished and his family put to all kinds of misery he had remained a mere spectator.

Could anything be done? And what reply should he give

Ramarao? Should he write that the matter of Pullayya standing guarantor to Chandrasekharam was true? Or, not true? Or, that he knew nothing about it? Or, should he continue to be silent and not respond? Or should he ask Ramarao to write to his father to find out the truth? Should he hand over the letter as also the burden of answering it, to Pullayya? Which among these six choices was he to make? While lost in such thoughts in the library, the day outside declined. After sundown, his elder son came searching for him to take him home.

Padma sorrowfully recollected that, injured by what she said, her husband had skipped his morning meal. She blamed herself for annoying him unnecessarily. When the night deepened, she went to him, and stroking his hair, said, "Your hair is turning completely grey, your cheeks are stretched taut and your eyes look sunken. Some foul worry seems to have got the better of you. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"Me? Worry? Why, can't I eat and roam about happily?" he smiled, looking at the beams of the roof.

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"Do these words come from the depths of your heart? No, they are from here, I know," she said tapping his head.

"Oh, let go of me."

"Have you stopped working with Pullayya?"

"Who said so?"

"Since you have not been going for the past ten days, I thought so. Has he asked you to stop? Or, have you quit on your own?"

"Neither."

"Ammayya²!" Padma sighed.

"Your breath smells of soil³ — come here, I tell you. What is that?"

"What ... what?" Padma grew pale.

"Tell me the truth!" he gnashed his teeth.

"If you are so suspicious...."

"So, you say it is only suspicion, not a fact."

He held Padma by the hair, dragged her quickly to the backyard and grabbing a rope, began flogging her. Without so much as a moan, she suffered those lashes. The fact that she

didn't weep infuriated him all the more. He continued lashing her. She fell down, but didn't say anything. He lashed her till he grew weary. Gasping, he stood watching her. Disgusted with himself, he spat in revulsion and walked out of the house.

After a few hours, Padma regained consciousness. Trying to get up, she tripped and fell. She had never imagined that things would go this far. Remembering the doctor's words, she wept. Now she had only one worry: what dreadful act might her husband commit? In that case, what would happen to her children? And herself? Wouldn't she and her children be despised, treated like insects? It frightened her to even imagine such a situation. Getting up somehow she drank the medicine kept somewhere and lay down on the mat. How good it would have been if she were dead! Unable to sleep, she tossed on the bed.

Satyanarayana Pantulu walked directly to the road. He didn't know where he had to go or what to do. He continued walking and came to a canal. The lanterns on the boat were twinkling: even they had become his enemies. Everything in Nature was conspiring to torment him, he thought. He walked briskly along the road next to the canal.

Surprisingly, he came across a boat every furlong. Whether it seemed so to him or was real, he couldn't decide. He started running. After some distance he stopped, short of breath. "Pantulu, Pantulu! There can't be another crazy person like you. Take the instance of Vasudeva Sastri. He evaded marriage, aware of the troubles it brought. Look how happy he is! He is also helping others to the extent possible. The people of the village hold him in high esteem. His is a life worth living." He looked around with a start and could find no one there, either. "If one wanted to chatter, come to me and cry. Then we will know who is mad. That rake Vasudeva Sastri — is he a man? Thu!" He spat. Feeling that those words were addressed to him, he became furious. He picked up a rock from a heap of gravel and flung it. It hit the base of the tree with a thud that sounded like someone was mocking him.

Terribly frightened, he began to run again but stopped, gasping for breath. "Really, you are mad. No doubt about it, Pantulu." With these words a frightful fit of laughter was heard. "Those who call me mad are themselves mad. Perhaps you want to drive me crazy this way. You are mistaken. That would never happen. Satyanarayana Pantulu is not an easy man to deal with," he rebuked "them" in a loud voice. Again the dreadful burst of laughter was heard. "Chatter, chatter! Go on prattling to your heart's content. Am I a mad man to be startled?" Uttering these words, he moved away slowly.

He reached the town that very night. Roaming the streets throughout the night, he rested by a wall near the door of a street house. At sunrise the maid servant of that house began to sweep the pyol. Shaking the dust from his clothes, he left the place. The whole day he tramped about in the streets of the town.

That evening, while driving the empty cart back to the village, Appalaswamy saw Satyanarayana Pantulu in the bazaar and asked, "Are you coming home?" He nodded. Dropping Satyanarayana Pantulu that night at the library, Appalaswamy drove his cart home. Satyanarayana Pantulu went directly to the verandah and lay down in a dark place, his hands under his head. He didn't know when he fell asleep. When he woke up, he heard people who had come there after dinner to talk.

"What has happened to the doctor?"

"That's what's strange. He has not been seen for the past ten days. The whole village is making its way to the hospital."

"He is not a person to go anywhere! Even if he does, he would be back by the same evening or the next morning. Did you find out if he told Satyanarayana Pantulu anything?"

"Satyanarayana Pantulu too seems to have vanished today. His elder son was looking for him."

"All this appears to be mysterious. Has Satyanarayana Pantulu also disappeared?"

"Perhaps he has gone to attend to some work!"

"Then why should his son search for him?"

"It is perplexing. First the doctor, and then Satyanarayana Pantulu. Anyway, things are coming to a head. Those born

to human parents won't stay in the village. Truly, this the age of Kali."

"That has been the trouble with you. You say that there was dharma only during the time of your parents. But do you know why Śatyanarayana Pantulu has disappeared?"

"Why don't you tell me, if you know?"

"They say he quarrelled with his wife and left home."

"It is a lie. Certainly it's not the truth. Śatyanarayana Pantulu and his wife are very good-natured. I have known Śatyanarayana Pantulu since he was this high. And her too. Their domestic life is a delight to watch."

"Then why has he left?"

"Who would stay in a village exploding with sin?"

"All right, then tell us when *you* are leaving? If you inform us in advance, my sister-in-law will take precautions."

"Stop teasing, you homeless fool."

"Whatever you say, something must have happened. That's why the doctor has gone away and Śatyanarayana Pantulu has disappeared. Now what will happen to Pantulu's children and his wife?"

"The world appears the way our hearts are, nothing more."

At midnight, those who lived near the library heard a low, weak voice intoning verses:

*The whole world is an illusion,
So is the birth of man —
The spirit moves from sorrow to sorrow
And the body is riddled with fear —
Everything is endless shrivelling of the body
Leaving behind wickedness!
Sri Kalahasthiswara⁴! Men will be released
From such travails by devotion to you⁵.*

*Diseased in mind,
What does man loathe —
And what are his aversions?
Swathed in passion,
What is daubed on the body —
And what are those applications?*

*Steeped in ignorance,
What is it that is hidden
And what are the secrets?
What is done and what are the deeds?
Oh Sri Kalahasthiswara, All is in vain!*

*Oh Sri Kalahasthiswara! You have thrust a wife on me
And given me children by her —
By the need of marrying them off
You created relationships.
You made some visit me,
Thus as a nut is tightened over another —
You made it hard for me to escape these bonds.*

The next morning when his elder son came up to him and stood by silently,

*Knowing all to be an illusion,
Man hankers after wives, sons and wealth,
Believing the body to be real,
He is deluded, lost in the sea of attachment
But, Oh Sri Kalahasthiswara!
He doesn't meditate on you the Ultimate
For even the measure of a tiny tamarind leaf.*

Satyanarayana Pantulu recited the poem in a melodious voice. Thoroughly alarmed his son continued to stand by his father.

"Why do you stare at me? Like you, I have two legs, hands and a nose. You have hair and so have I. Then why do you stare so at me? Go, go away."

"Nanna, nanna," tears filled the boy's eyes.

"Who is nanna? Tch, tch, you are so deluded. It's not that. All this causal world is an illusion, a pure illusion."

*Like a piece of cloth,
Like a rope and a serpent,
Like the silvery oyster-shell
Like a frail pot,
Like the milky stone flushed red beside a coral flower⁶*

*Thus some vile minds mouth great thoughts
Without any bliss in their hearts,
These wretched ones try to gain at the tiniest sound,
Oh, Sri Kalahasthiswara!*

Kusalayya, feeding dried millet stems to the animals, stopped and said, "It's true Pantulu garu, true. The poor child stands and waits for you. Now please go home." The card game also ceased half way and those players also supported Kusalayya's words.

"Look you are drifting once again into maya. To think of a house or a threshold or something as mine or yours — all this is mere attachment. One who is entangled in attachment, how would he attain moksha, freedom from earthly bonds? Unless it is rooted out life is pointless and futile," said Satyanarayana Pantulu. Just then Pullayya arrived. Immediately on seeing him, Satyanarayana Pantulu sang out:

*Oh Sri Kalahasthiswara!
How unhappy it is that some,
Slaying others wish to attain power,
And lead a carefree life!
Won't such people die or lose their wealth?
Will they live in bliss forever
With sons, friends, wives and others?
Won't they ever die?*

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Pullayya, laughing, said, "What, Pantulu! All right. You are a good man, but get up. They are anxious about you at home. Why do you make them suffer? Come, let's go," he held his hand, but Satyanarayana Pantulu did not stir. Kusalayya, leaving the straw and coir by his side, came up and held Pantulu's other hand. Having no choice Satyanarayana Pantulu went home.

That day at the library, people talked about Satyanarayana Pantulu and the doctor. Why the doctor had left, and why Satyanarayana Pantulu had become deranged they could not divine. But everyone felt sorry.

By the time Ammayamma guru, gasping, slowly moved her corpulent self from the harijan ashram to Mallayya's house that evening, she was reminded of her ancestors. Receiving her at home, Mallayya's son led her to a chair in a room. Wiping her perspiring face with her saree, she asked, "What is your father doing inside?" The boy had grown to dislike her these days. If she somehow could be sent away without meeting his father, she would learn a lesson, he thought. In what other way could he annoy her?

"Ayyo¹, he has just left for the fields!" he said.

Ammayamma garu went limp with despair. Her expression delighted him.

"Won't he be back in an hour?" she asked feeling too lazy to get up.

"Won't it be eight or nine by the time he comes back? In addition, he had some other work," he said. She looked at him.

Just then Mallayya came in. "What, boy! You said your father had gone to the fields?"

Mallayya understood at once the prank his son had played on her.

"True, I set out to the fields, but I returned to pick up the sickle. Go tell the servant to feed the cow kudithi² and personally see that straw is readied for the bullocks' feed."

The cow wouldn't drink kudithi and the bullocks had had their feed of straw just a while ago. Realising that his father wanted him out of the way, the boy left scowling.

"Looks like you've strayed in here by mistake," Mallayya began.

"No, I'm here on work."

He looked at her as if to say, "Why don't you tell me what

the work is?"

"Oh, it's nothing much. With the incidents of the past few days, our village has earned a permanent reputation."

"What is destined to happen happens. Whether we wish it or not, it cannot be arrested," Mallayya sighed.

"What you say is indeed true. Did we ever expect that Chandrasekharam would behave as he did? Wasn't it just for the error on my part in asking that his children be sent to the ashram that he wrote to the papers fabricating so many lies about me and the ashram? Wasn't it because you didn't take sides in the case that he wrote in such a way?"

"Besides all this, if Chandrasekharam hadn't been unlucky he wouldn't have come by so many difficulties."

"He still nurses a grudge against Pullayya. Otherwise, he wouldn't speak so," Ammayamma garu could guess.

"True. Three children and Lalitha left with no relatives. Leave that be. Money? Has she any money? No! How the family gets on, God only knows. In truth, who are we to judge Chandrasekharam's character? But in a society there must be such things as high and low, prestige and respect. What will happen if everyone ignoring tradition, behaves like him? Will it be possible for people like us to live, heads held high? Take your own example. Do you know anything about the case? Yet, your haystack was set on fire. And my ashram, useful to everyone, was burnt down. Did they stop there? They provoked the people in the harijan quarter to overrun the village. Has such an outrage occurred anywhere else before? No untoward incidents happened, of course, as the police came in time, or else, could we have continued to live in the village? Minor differences among us have led to this. Mallayya garu, don't take my words amiss: give them serious thought. It is Pullayya's life that has been dragged out into the open — has anything less been done? His clerk's home was burnt down, his bull was killed. And all kinds of blame thrown on him. Isn't his wife ill because of all this? Truly, isn't it Pullayya garu who has lost heavily in every way? Whether he is a gentleman or not, unless the two big heads of the village unite neither our properties nor our lives are safe. Just think about it."

Listening to her Mallayya stroked his moustache with his left hand. Ammayamma resumed, "There won't be another and better opportunity to forget old enmities and patch up. This is the only chance to retrieve your reputation in the village and for him to save his self-respect."

"I am unable to understand your meaning," said Mallayya staring at Ammayamma garu from top to toe.

If her attempts were stymied by anyone, she knew it could only be by Mallayya. That was why she had approached him first.

"Please listen till I finish what I have to say, and then you can talk. Today it is Pullayya garu who has suffered in the village. If some of us get together to honour him, then he cannot reject our counsel. Much can be achieved with that. Belligerent elements from the harijan quarter and others can be taught a lesson. Besides, very soon the elections will be held. How good it would be, if someone from our village were to become an M.L.A. All kinds of things can be accomplished. And it will be possible for our village to outshine all the others around. For such a thing to happen, there should be a great man among us. This will not occur by itself, we have to make it happen. This function to felicitate Pullayya will contribute to that. Once Pullayya becomes an M.L.A., you can become the President of the Panchayat Board and the secretary of the school. Why wouldn't Pullayya guru agree to this arrangement? Isn't this good?"

Mallayya began thinking. What he wanted was a complete lack of competition and opposition in the village. If Pullayya went off to the Assembly, all the affairs of the village would be left in his hands. Above all, there was a crying need to control the harijan labourers. If there were factions in the village, this task would be impossible. Apart from that, what need to harass Pullayya? He had won the case and the whole village was calling him a dharmatma, a just man. Even the labourers and workers regarded Pullayya with fear and respect. What about himself, Mallayya? He had lost the hayrick! In addition, he had to cough up two thousand to Ammayamma garu. On top of it, the whole village viewed him as the cause of all

recent suffering. In such circumstances, what could he possibly do? If he participated in the ceremony to honour Pullayya, no one would have the guts to even look at him.

"You haven't told me what you are planning," said Mallayya.

"Ah, why do we have to plan so seriously? When the anniversary of the ashram is celebrated we'll take that opportunity to have Pullayya garu's photograph unveiled by the minister, followed by a tea-party."

Thinking that it was like parading the priest during the festival of a village deity, he said, "That's good, but what about the funds?"

"Isn't it enough if a couple of people like you contribute liberally?"

"Oh so I'm to be burdened yet again? Then, not even a dammidi will you get from me."

"Why are you so afraid? When you have paid upto two thousand for the huts, do you suppose I would ask you for such paltry amounts?" Ammayamma garu laughed. He felt relieved. "Then, who would garland the minister and present the scroll honouring him?"

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"You have to garland both the minister and Pullayya guru and present the scrolls."

"Leave me out, you had better choose someone else."

"No, you have to perform this task. Otherwise, all our efforts will go waste."

Letting her importune him for a while, he agreed to the proposal. Ammayamma garu felt a great burden lift from her heart. When Mallayya himself had assented, what other hitch could there be?

That day, Pullayya, sitting at home, was tallying the accounts that had piled up. Had Satyanarayana Pantulu been attending to the work regularly, he wouldn't have had this trouble. But he was totally deranged and the cause was unknown. If Chandrasekharam's affair was the cause then it should have happened long ago. It was unlikely that the source was of a domestic nature. No wife could be as loyal as Padma. Then why this insanity? If only the doctor had been in the village!

Why did he too disappear at a crucial time! He was not one to go out anywhere. Why did he go? And where? Disgusted with the affairs of the village, did he say "Jai Parameshwara" and do the vanishing act? It seemed probable. If it was true, not just himself, even if the whole village howled, there would be no medicines. Even if one was prepared to pay, where could one get such attention? Eleven, four, fifteen; fifteen and seven, twenty-two — poor Satyanarayana Pantulu, his life would be miserable. If I don't support them, who will?

Within these few months Pullayya's hair had turned completely grey. When he went in, Rangamma told him that Rami's husband was dead.

"Of what disease?"

"Disease! He fell dead while eating, poor fellow."

He went to the backyard and saw Subbadu lying dead. The sight left him completely shaken. Such was the fate of our wretched lives, fragile pots³, he reflected. Arranging for Subbadu's cremation, he went straight to the hut where Punnayya's wife was staying. She was afraid that even that shelter would be taken away from her. But he didn't ask her to vacate. Instead, he said, "Why do you suffer living away from the village? Subbadu's room has fallen vacant. Come over and occupy it after the ten days of mourning." She looked surprised and silently thanked Tirupathi Venkanna.

Pullayya didn't think that he had done a great deed; he merely felt he had done what he could. That didn't mean that he didn't know about Punnayya. He was not unaware that for a while Punnayya had shuffled towards Chandrasekharam. Perhaps he was attracted by the lure of money. Greed was a powerful force. Besides why should he nurse a grudge against a dead man? In fact, even thinking about it was unnecessary.

He went to the canal and sat on its bank. A frog leapt into the canal from the grass on the bank. He had overcome the baleful influence of the planets and emerged unscathed. There was a time when he couldn't get a wink of sleep, but now he slept without a care. No one could trouble him now, though they had tried to harm him in every way: writing gross canards about him; inciting his son against him. His son, being

innocent, did not understand these things, judging everything by its appearance. It was better that these matters didn't reach his ears. The doctor had tried to get him released. But why hadn't he been released yet? That was a mystery. He had to inquire about him again, as the old woman was longing to see him.

There was something that still amused him. Some time ago he himself had had doubts about his innocence. How surprising! Now he was able to recall everything. While they were in the room in the hotel, Chandrasekharam had asked him to be his guarantor. But was the document signed in the hotel room? What could be a greater lie than that? The old woman had been bawling since the beginning that his nature was benign, and so he had blindly believed Chandrasekharam when he said that he had indeed stood guarantor. But then he hadn't known that Chandrasekharam was so wicked.

After many days peace prevailed in the village. Now, there would not be any shortage of labourers. His neighbours might believe some of the rumours floated against him. Let them. He had his lands to support him. Did he care what others thought of him?

Chandrasekharam's family was suffering terribly. They said that since the sentence, Lalitha had become bedridden. When her husband had drowned her midstream, how could her fate be any different? Who was responsible for another's karma?

By the time Pullayya returned home, Ammayamma garu was sitting in the hall. She told him that the village had decided to have a celebration to honour him and that the minister had consented to unveil his portrait on the occasion of the anniversary of the harijan ashram.

"For me? A celebration in my honour?" Pullayya laughed, unable to believe his own ears.

"When will it be convenient for you?" Ammayamma garu asked him.

So it was true, after all! Pullayya thought for a while.

"A corpse has just been carried away from my backyard. Should I attend a party?" he asked. Lakshmmamma was

surprised at such a response when they intended to honour him. She knew that it was no use forcing him then.

Ammayamma garu went back. She was astonished. They contemplated honouring him so highly, and he hadn't even expressed any gratitude. She realised with a shock how very arrogant he was.

THIRTY-THREE

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The harijan ashram was buzzing with activity. A pandal covered the whole premises. On one side stood a huge dais. The students of the high school and the ashram and youngsters of the village were busy completing the decorations. On the other side, hired labourers were engaged in erecting palm fronds and the stems of plantain trees and fastening them to supports. All the huts were being whitewashed. Ammayamma garu couldn't find a free moment: on the one hand, she was busy driving the boys to collect the contributions that were due; on the other, attending the dance drama rehearsal, instructing them, "That should be like that, this should be done so. At this point, it is better to perform like this." At the same time, she also remembered to send a man to town to fetch the garlands they had forgotten to bring. And yes! If there was going to be a procession, how could it go on without a band of musicians? She entrusted Kusalayya standing by her, with the task of asking Kotappa to come by for a talk. A mike and loud speakers were also necessary; and so another person was assigned the duty of fetching those items from the town.

She heard someone telling the others that Lalithamma hadn't yet recovered. What a lapse! Without asking about her and comforting her, Ammayamma garu didn't feel like participating in the function. If she would agree, Ammayamma garu wanted to admit Lalitha's children in the ashram. With that noble aim, Ammayamma garu walked slowly towards the thatched shed Lalitha now lived in.

When she reached the hut, she found the door closed. A girl, probably Lalithamma's eldest daughter, was drawing water from the well outside.

"Where is Lalithamma?"

"Inside the house," was the terse reply.

"Will you tell her that I have come?"

"Who should I say has come?"

"Go and tell her that it is Ammayamma garu. She knows me."

The girl went inside and returned after a while. "She is not well enough to speak... 'I won't forget your kindness,' she asked me to tell you," said the girl.

"What will she do hereafter?"

"Who knows?"

Ammayamma garu nearly wept. "This tea party and felicitation must have hurt her. Still, what can we do? A wrong is a wrong. Shouldn't justice be honoured?" She returned to the ashram, brooding.

The next morning was filled with the strains of Anandabhairavi¹. An endless stream of cars was moving towards and from the ashram. Lalitha slowly came out of her hut and sat on the bare ground. Her unkempt hair fluttered untidily in the wind. Her eldest daughter was washing utensils near the well.

"Amma, it seems there's a celebration there today."

Staring blankly Lalitha didn't respond.

"After cleaning the vessels, may I go there with my younger sister?"

"Ayyo, my poor darling, is that our fate?" Hiding her face in her saree she tried to wipe her tears away. However hard she tried, she could not suppress her sobs. The girl, shocked, came to her mother and hugged her, hands covered with white ash².

"Amma, I won't go. Really, I won't. I said that because I didn't know any better. Why are you crying?" The girl consoled her mother. After some time, Lalitha somehow controlled herself.

"What is going on in the ashram today?"

"They are crowning dharma," said Lalitha.

The girl didn't understand and stood looking at her. Elbow on her thigh, cheek resting on her palm, Lalitha began musing. Her eyes looked unhealthy and sunken. How was she going to manage the children? What should be done? How could four bellies be filled? No use thinking about it now. She might even go mad. If that too were to engulf her, there would be no chance to even look after the children.

The previous day she had received a letter from her husband. He wrote to say that he was trying to appeal to the High Court. Now Lalitha had no faith in him at all. Her husband was not innocent. If only he had told her this at the very beginning! He hadn't even trusted her. From the start her father had beaten his forehead in despair. He had been quite right. What an awful fate her old father had met with!

"Why are you standing there like that? Clean the vessels quickly and if some rice is cooked, your younger brother could be fed."

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The girl was about to finish her job of cleaning the vessels. Meanwhile, the band of musicians was approaching. Following them came students and ashram inmates holding tri-colour flags and shouting slogans, "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai, Jawarharlal Nehru ki jai. Mantrigariki jai, Pullayyagariki jai." The police escort formed the front and rear of the procession, and in the middle of it was the minister's car. Pullayya sat beside the minister, both of them weighed down with garlands of cotton yarn and flowers. As the car approached her hut, Lalitha stood up. Seeing Pullayya's striking figure, she brought her hands together reverently. The girl observing her mother, did the same with her tiny hands.

In that hubbub, no one knew whether anyone had seen the gestures of those two beings, but Pullayya did and turned away from them. The minister took in the scene and thought, "Pullayya is really an embodiment of dharma — a blessed creature," believing that modesty had prompted him to look away.

Cars kept passing by. But Pullayya didn't appear to be enthusiastic. Why was he being honoured — he could not

understand the motive. Surprisingly, Mallayya was also involved in this. What was on *his* mind — only the Creator knew. Anyway, this could not be a prank. Who would dare to mock the ministers? He looked at the gate of the ashram. Car upon car! People in suits! And so many in Gandhi caps! Was it an ordinary thing to be singled out and so honoured? There must be something unique about him. Else, was the world blind to honour him? He suspected that he was at fault in Chandrasekharam's affair. If he was, would they honour him thus? No, it was exclusively Chandrasekharam's fault. He himself hadn't strayed a whit from dharma. That was understood by the court, and the public were now applauding approvingly.

The cars entered the compound of the ashram. Ammayamma garu, Mallayya and the senior members of the community escorted the minister and Pullayya to the dais. The pandal reverberated with slogans hailing them. National flags fluttered. Loud speakers filled the air with the national anthem, *Jana gana mana adhinayaka jayahe*³... Ammayamma garu was annoyed that sodas and paan weren't yet ready and so she sent a boy to the shop in the village. Anxious to avoid blunders, she moved around the pandal without stopping anywhere. The village elders were arriving, she was instructing the high school teachers who should be seated where. She tried to remember whether she had forgotten anything. Yes, where were the copies of the annual report? They had to be somewhere in the office room. She sent a student to look for them. And wiping her perspiration, she walked towards the dais.

THIRTY-FOUR

Getting off the train in the morning, Ramarao hired a jutka to complete the journey to his village. The driver was maintaining a fair pace when Ramarao saw the doctor, lost in thought, walking leisurely on the pavement. He instructed the driver to stop

and called out to the doctor. But Vasudeva Sastri did not hear him and continued walking.

Clapping to attract attention, Ramarao shouted, "Doctor garu! Doctor garu!"

Vasudeva Sastri was walking with his head bowed. Ramarao walked up to him briskly and touched the doctor's shoulder. Startled, Vasudeva Sastri turned to look at him.

"Ramarao! You! When did you come?"

"I got off the train just now. What are doing here?"

"In the olden days when people opted for vanaprastha and sanyasa ashrams¹, there were forests everywhere. What should today's sanyasis do? Such cities appear to be their refuge."

"What does that mean? ... aren't you living in the village now?"

The doctor shook his head as if to say "no".

"Since when?" he asked, surprised.

"Some fifteen or twenty days."

"Why did you leave? Where are you staying now? What are you doing?"

"Care of roads and pavements. As for my job, you can see for yourself."

"Are you joking?"

"Is expressing the truth a joke?" Ramarao was surprised. He didn't understand why the doctor had come away in the manner he had.

"Anyway, I am lucky. I have met you here, so it's all right. Otherwise, my journey of many hundred miles would have been in vain."

"What do you mean?"

"I have come only to see you. What other interest do I have in that village?"

The doctor stared at Ramarao. "You were born in that village, raised there, and have property there. Today your father is being honoured. How can you have no work there?"

"My father is to be honoured? By whom? And why?"

"Yes, your father. The Minister is going to unveil his portrait. The whole village has spontaneously come forward to honour him. What are you staring at?"

Ramarao was taken aback. For a while he couldn't speak.

"So, doctor garu, people like you live there and yet perform such things!"

The jutka driver called out to Ramarao. Asking him to park the jutka in the cart-stand, Ramarao and the doctor entered a hotel. Seated in a corner, they ordered coffee.

"Have you come out on parole?" the doctor asked.

"No, I was released unconditionally. I've come directly to you."

"To me? What's the matter?"

"Well, what happened to Chandrasekharam's case?"

"What else? He got three years in prison."

"Chandrasekharam?"

"Yes!"

"Doctor garu, doctor garu! Somehow he must be released. It is vital! Whatever happens. Please hear me. Get up."

Ramarao stood up and held the doctor's hand.

"Impossible. Now it's beyond us, no matter what we do."

"Is that all then? Is that all? An honest, innocent man has to spend three years in prison? Should his family for no fault of theirs be ruined? Will you remain silent in the face of this injustice? While Sekharam suffers in jail and his wife and children and starve, will you continue to gobble food three times a day and belch? Will you continue to carry the culprit on your shoulders singing the refrain of the palanquin bearers? Doctor, doctor, I thought you would stand for truth and dharma, that you would oppose injustice bravely even at the risk of your life. I didn't expect you to actually crave for the food of sin. I thought the doctor was the crown of a blazing tongue of flame. Yes, the fault is mine, how is it yours? Did you ever proclaim that you were the embodiment of dharma? And that you would sacrifice your life for the sake of truth and justice? No, you too are like the others. Rolling around in mud, you think you are in heaven. That's all — all my mistake: a mistake to expect you to be the ideal man, a devotee of truth, a foe of injustice. My lack of worldly wisdom is the reason for this mistake. Forgive me, doctor garu, forgive me. If, by mistake, I have spoken any harsh words, forget them. I take leave of you."

Leaving his coffee untouched, he quickly paid the bill and hurried out. The doctor rushed after him, forced him to return and sat him down in the place he had just vacated. The people around watched their strange behaviour curiously.

"What is the use of such hollow emotions, that lead only to ridicule? Already people are staring at us. Finish that coffee and we can thrash things out later," The doctor pleaded with him in a low voice. Ramarao gulped his coffee and wiped his mouth. Both of them walked out.

"It was all my father's fault. Chandrasekharam didn't forge anything, he did no wrong. It is my father who is guilty of an atrocious deed. I turned against him. Anticipating that I would tender evidence in favour of Chandrasekharam, he had me arrested."

"So all this is true?" the doctor sighed, depressed.

Ramarao was surprised.

"How do you know?"

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The doctor explained how Lakshmamma, in the delirium of typhoid, had talked wildly, but truthfully. The doctor told him how he, unable to guess the truth, had comforted her to free her from worry. The doctor also recalled what Punneyya had said on his deathbed.

"At that time I wasn't convinced that your father was doing something unjust, though I suspected it. Now it is confirmed."

"Can't something be done now?" asked Ramarao anxiously.

"It's too late now. Even the last date for preferring an appeal has probably lapsed. Look, why didn't you tell me all this on the day you came to me?"

Ramarao didn't know how to answer. If only he had informed the doctor, Chandrasekharam wouldn't have received this sentence. He, Ramarao, was the real culprit. He hated himself. When he realised what his inability to act had led to, his eyes filled with tears.

"I tried to convince my father somehow — somehow — to withdraw the case. But — but I didn't expect him to go this far. If only I had told you the facts when the police came for me, if only I had done that, this gross injustice would not have been committed. No! Never!"

"Why didn't you at least write to me later?"

"I did write! But it was in vain."

"Who did you write to? Me?"

"No, to Satyanarayana garu. But there was no reply at all from him."

The doctor was silent. After a while he sighed and said, "Karna died at the hands of six², we may say." Ramarao didn't speak. The stillness grew unbearable.

"What is to be done now?" Vasudeva Sastry asked.

"Doctor babu, this felicitation shouldn't be permitted. If I'm alive I won't allow it to be held. How can we watch and accept the honours rendered with triumphal shouts to a heartless demon, a sinner, heedless of dharma? Unbearable. Three minutes --- enough to die, if you block your nose. No, I will go at once and expose his real nature in public. I won't stand by passively. Let him beat me or kill me, I won't tolerate it anymore. I have done enough injustice to protect the reputation of the family. Why should I respect parents who cannot stand my telling the truth, and a father who handed me over to the police so callously? No, a wrong is a wrong, no matter who the perpetrator: Father, a leader, or even God. If I cannot act according to my conscience, what are all these properties and luxuries for? What is this life worth?"

Brushing aside the doctor who tried to stop him, Ramarao rushed to the jutka and jumped in telling the driver to move. In the last minute, the doctor too — what he thought was not clear — leapt into the moving cart.

The cart crossed the town limits and moved briskly along the road. After a while, the doctor slowly resumed:

"Ramu! Listen to me before you act. How old do you think I am now? Past thirty-five. So for thirty five years, I have been in touch with the villagers, particularly during the last ten years of my medical practice. After qualifying and developing a bit of practice, it's not impossible to get acquainted with a few villagers, and understand their ways.

"Now you say you will reveal everything at a public function. If you do so, do you know what will happen? Have you thought about it? They will drag you down before you finish

what you want to say. And call you a mad fellow. Then what would your truth be? It makes no difference whether you tell the truth or not. Just as your conscience guides you, so too their conscience guides them. I have been struggling among them for so many years. Why do you think I ran away?"

"Have you fled the place? Who are the wicked people who drove you away?"

"I left the place on my own, yes. I can't name those who drove me away. The situation obliged me to leave. I found it difficult to live there, so I left."

"What really happened?" Ramarao looked at the doctor. Vasudeva Sastri was silent.

"Won't you tell me? Don't you have any faith in me?" he pleaded. The doctor didn't like to hurt him.

202 "Something like Chandrasekharam's case — I tried to lead a proper life after making reparations but it was no use. I was utterly disgusted. The ideal for which I lived in the village all these years was shattered. It was futile — to have striven for so many years. I couldn't understand why I even continued to live. I have been pondering over it for a fortnight. Ramu, I see that you are very like me. That's why I'm taking the trouble to explain these things. Consider whether my experience is any way useful to you.

"The present day villages are merely murky pits of dirt, maintained by lies and injustice. Money, power and ignorance are their family deities. In the name of hoary tradition, they revel in the slime of sin. And the most horrible thing is that they know it. If they did not, there would have been a chance to make them aware of it sometime. But when things are done consciously and many people destroy themselves, what can the goal possibly be? There is really no cure for this disease. Even the doctor who tries to heal it will either fall prey to it, or flee the place. You too know that that's no exaggeration. You may ask whether the towns are not so as well. Perhaps they are. But there is a slight difference they won't insist that you conform to their standards. That bit of freedom they still offer. I can't predict the future. But today, you can live exactly the way you want to in a town. Unless your actions affect

the lives of others, you will face no obstacles in town. There is greater freedom, individuality — not so much mass hysteria and mob mentality. If a situation is explained in a rational way, it is received. Whether they follow it is a different matter. There is at least hope that it might come into practice tomorrow, if not today. Isn't it better? That's why I have decided to stay in town."

"Look here, stop the cart! The doctor wants to get off. Don't you hear me? Stop the cart!" Ramarao spoke irritably. The cart stopped.

"Go on, please, go on. I have some work in the village." The cart resumed its journey on the doctor's urging.

"Yes, your annoyance is quite natural. Born and raised in a village and educated on money earned in the village, if one treats the villager like a pest, what villager won't get angry? Ramu, I can't find fault with you. You are educated. I explained my viewpoint in the hope that you would understand. I laid bare to you my thirty-five years of experience and what it has taught me. Can't I act according to my conscience? Are you saying that I don't even have the right to do that? I am not asking you to leave the village. How can we predict what your experience will be? Do as you like and tell me if I object to it."

"They say that once when a king asked for milk, a merchant thought he could safely pour water when so many others had brought pure milk."

"You cannot convince me against my experience. That's not the way to wisdom. If it is really your intention to convince me, you have to accept my experience and explain the factors behind the experience and how it can be correlated with your own broader perspective."

"This will apply to you as well."

That's why I am not forcing any decision on you. Otherwise, I would have done so at the point of a sword."

Ramarao didn't speak. He scowled his aversion. He had thought he knew the doctor well, but now he understood that he had not divined his nature at all.

The function to mark the anniversary of the ashram ended in the morning and the meeting to felicitate Pullayya began at three in the afternoon. On the dais were seated the minister garu and Pullayya. On the walls by the dais were hung portraits of prominent political leaders. The national flag fluttered on both sides of the dais. The loud speaker blared the national anthem and songs praising Andhradesam¹. In the first row were seated district officials and elders from the neighbouring villages. Behind them sat the elders and ryots of the village. In the third row were the boys and girls. On the other side sat students from the local high school, inmates of the ashram, and about ten women. On Ammayamma garu's signal, Mallayya garlanded all the elders on the dais. Thunderous applause broke out. Ammayamma garu ascended the dais and explaining the significance of the day's function began:

“President, Ladies and Gentlemen!

“Undoubtedly we may say that this is a uniquely auspicious day, because we are fortunate to witness and adore a great effulgence that has remained obscure among us all these days. It is widely believed among us villagers that the birth of a celebrity coincides with the appearance of a new star in the firmament or the occurrence of other auspicious omens. But owing to the fact that this is Kaliyuga or that there are other reasons, such happy omens do not seem to manifest themselves. It is an erroneous notion that the absence of such signs denotes a lack of splendid, selfless patriots. Our National Movement itself is an example of this. People have sprung up who have made great sacrifices hitherto unknown in history, brave warriors of non-violence. It is because of them that we are enjoying freedom today. Therefore, it is our duty to recognise such great men and follow in their footsteps. Normally,

recognising and paying due respect to a great personage living in our midst is difficult. Only the distant mountains appear smooth.

“Take, for instance, our Pullayya garu. He is rather tall, grey, and dressed in ordinary khadder² garments. Aren’t there may such people? So what’s special about him? Such doubts are but natural. To some extent, most people in the village may already know his qualities. But others, outsiders, may not. Though he looks very ordinary, he is an incarnation of dharma, to uphold which he will not flinch from any kind of travail or obstacle. The way Pullayya garu handled Chandrasekharam’s affair is an example of this unswerving resolve. Five thousand is not a considerable amount for him. But forgery — that cannot be forgiven. That’s why he fought a solitary battle. And the court confirmed what was dharmic.

“Now for his compassion for animals! It became obvious when the harijans created unrest in the village and killed the bull. Pullayya, unaided, jumped into the crowded street, staff in hand, and all the trouble makers were silenced in no time. It was a sight to see Pullayya garu, eyes flaming red, staff in hand. ‘Was it this Pullayya who roared that day?’ we wonder. That should not be misconstrued to mean that he hates the poor and working class and is reluctant to raise their wages. Unwilling to keep the chavadi vacant, he allowed a couple who were labourers to live in it free of charge and also helped them in their need. It’s wrong to think that he did so only because they were working for him. Though they became invalids, he continued to support them. A couple of days ago, when Subbadu died, Pullayya bore the entire expenses of the funeral. That very day when we told him, ‘We are planning to felicitate you. When will it be convenient for you?’ do you know what he replied? ‘Shall I prepare for the felicitation when a corpse lies in my backyard?’ That was what he said.

“There is another, even stranger incident. When he found out that the government was sending the police to arrest his son suspected to be a communist, do you know what he did? ‘Chi! The bad fruit of my loins! He who is not a son to the country, is not my son either. He will be in the village for two

days. Tell them that they must definitely arrest him. How can I hold my head high before others?' he said. This is a model not only for Andhradesam, but for the whole of Bharat. If all fathers were like this, would there be any traitors? Would there be chaos? How many of us are so devoted to the country, and have his sense of reuniciation? Who can Bharath honour today other than such people? We are really fortunate to receive the opportunity to honour such an embodiment of dharma, a compassionate man and a great patriot. May such distinguished men live their complete life spans and blaze a trail for us to follow! This is my prayer to Parameswara, God, on behalf of all of you. Now I request the Minister to unveil Pullayya garu's portrait."

As soon as Ammayamma garu finished her speech, the sound of applause rent the air. The ryots and youngsters of the village shouted triumphal slogans "Sardar Pullayyagaruki jai". Amidst applause, the minister rose to speak. In a moment silence prevailed.

"Dear citizens, I deem it my good fortune to both know Pullayya garu and to now unveil his portrait and also for the opportunity of meeting you all. Today the country is faced with many critical problems: workers' strikes on one side, fear of famine on another and the atrocities of the communist traitors on yet another. To solve all of them and to achieve progress, the government needs the public's cooperation. It's wrong to think that we can leave it to the government to solve everything and that our business is to enjoy ourselves. We have a saying, 'As the king, so the people.' That was a maxim of the days of monarchy. This is the age of democracy, so it would be apt to say, 'As the people, so the king.' Which means that the caliber of the government depends on the quality of the people. So what we need today are the champions of dharma and soldiers of action and people with patriotic zeal like Pullayya garu. It is my hope that all of you would emulate his qualities and contribute to the glory of our country. From your slogans I understand that you wish to honour Pullayya garu with the title of 'Sardar.' I endorse your opinion and henceforth he may be respected with the honorific 'Sardar.'"

Finishing his address the minister unveiled the portrait.

Again the deafening shouts, "Minister garuki jai," "Sardar Pullayya garuki jai" filled the air. In the tumult, the minister in his capacity as President said, "Those who wish to speak on this occasion may do so." The clamour subsided: people whispered among themselves asking others to speak. Then the doctor limped up to the dias, as the villagers shouted, "Doctor garuki jai, doctor garuki jai."

"What! Sastri! they said you were away, What sky have you dropped from?" the minister asked in a low voice.

"I have just arrived," said the doctor, went up to the podium and began:

"Gentlemen, there is nothing special I can say to add to what the elders who spoke before me have already said. Besides, a person like me earning a livelihood by dispensing medicines can only understand the symptoms of diseases and the method of treatment; but what do I know about dharma and adharma, good and evil, nobility and meanness? However, I have known Pullayya garu for quite a few years. All the people of this village know all about him. There is only one thing I'd like to say. I'm one of those who are pleased that he is being honoured today, because the public are aware of what is good and what is bad. This is happy sign. Apart from that, a small matter needs to be mentioned here. A man is a man and can never be divine. To be fallible, to err, is unavoidable, whatever the status of the person. I say this out of experience. In the past, the British government broke my left leg and recently my right leg was broken by the hon'ble minister — excuse me, not the minister — by the government. Probably I did something wrong and this is the result. Such mistakes cannot be avoided. In the case the village has just witnessed, the court passed a sentence against Chandrasekhar-am, it did not find his wife and children guilty. They are now without any support. Lalitha is a housewife who never once left the confines of her home. And the three children are too tender to earn their livelihood. So, it is humane to help the family and I believe that Sardar Pullayya garu and others are sufficiently broad-minded.

There is another thing which is in fact very personal but which I'd like to mention in public, with a suspicion that it might be related to the interests of society. I am leaving this village, giving up my practice. I have an ancestral house in my village. All the village elders know that I have no other relatives. Now, the late Polayya saved my life recently risking his own. Had he not done so, where would I have been today? We can sacrifice our property and wealth, respect and fame, but it's not an ordinary thing to die for the sake of another. His was such a great sacrifice. How can I repay him? Impossible. Now his family has no refuge. Therefore, I bequeath my house to his heirs, his children and grandchildren. Here are the registered documents. Ammayamma garu who is working for the welfare of harijans, and Ramarao, who is devoted to the upliftment of villages — I request them to help the family of Polayya to enjoy the rights that are conferred by this document. To all the villagers my namaskaram³."

Though there were shouts from the audience as the doctor got off the stage, he thrust the documents in Ammayamma's hands and limped away. Meanwhile, Kusalayya appeared from somewhere and held the doctor's hand. There was some slight disturbance in the audience. The President rose and said, "Whatever you wish to say had better be spoken from the dias." Kusalayya timidly ascended the dais and said, "Doctor garu can give his house to anyone and no one would object. But we request him not to leave the village and all of us wish that he should stay on here with us. Doctor garu should consider our request." He stepped down from the stage once again, Sastri stood up and expressed his gratitude for the affection the villagers had for him and firmly declared that for certain reasons he could not stay there. Then he stepped down.

Whispers ran through the audience, subsiding only at the request of the President. Pullayya, getting up, expressed his thanks for being honoured and said, "What the doctor has rendered is unique — the village owes him a great deal for his devoted service, extended both by day and night. All the people in the village request him with one voice to continue here.

Everyone wishes that he should stay on in the house he has occupied and help the village. The people are ready to provide another house and a piece of land to Polayya's family. I request him to come and express his consent at least now."

As he spoke, the doctor made it clear from the back row that he had to leave. Again Pullayya began, "When the doctor is determined to leave, what can we do? It is our misfortune. Now, he has mentioned an important thing. Chandrasekhar-am erred, not his family. His wife, poor woman, is put to hardship, with no one to support her. How should the four of them press on with their lives? Let us all contribute to help the family. As my share I'm contributing five hundred rupees."

The audience clapped their hands in joy. Some praised Pullayya's generosity. Others said approvingly, "That is magnanimity. One should forget the bitterness and help one's enemy. Yet, how many can do so?" Ammayamma garu also was pleased with this and called for contributions. Donations up to a thousand rupees were collected.

Next, refreshments were served. The programme continued with the students of the ashram presenting a dance drama: The subject of the performance was the awakening of a lazy farmer who, urged by his wife, breaks the fetters of ignorance, tames stubborn Nature, wins Her favour, subdues and cultivates the unyielding waste land, raises crops and distributes grain to the people. The meeting ended amidst great applause. Unable to control her joy over the success of the function Ammayamma garu shed tears of joy.

The doctor opened the doors of his house. Lighting the lantern, he began packing his things. When he saw the box containing the things used for pooja and a cracked mirror in a wooden frame, he was reminded of his parents. They seemed to say, "What use was it, raising you with such affection? What is to happen will come to pass anyway."

"What do I need? I am happy," he told himself. When he opened the box, he found the dried mogali rekulu⁴ rustling in the creases of a silk saree. He pressed them to his eyes reverently. "Vasu⁵, forgive me, I never thought I would be unfaithful to you. It happened without any evil intention. You

know it, too. I know that you will surely forgive me. Wasn't it your heart that taught me this strict observance?" he reflected silently. He packed them into a box and locked it. Then he filled the medicine bottles in dealwood boxes, packing them closely. He crammed surgical instruments into a box and books into four others. He bundled all the cooking vessels in a sack and stitched the mouth of the sack. He rolled up the mattress and tied it with rope. Then he heard a sound. Mustering some energy he turned.

"What, boy! What have you come here for? Do you want your father's medicine mixed with poison?" The doctor laughed.

"Is it true that you are leaving the village?" Mallayya's son asked, choking.

"Who told you these blatant lies?"

"Well —, as you are packing everything, I thought —"

The doctor went on with his work silently.

"Doctor garu, don't go away! What sin have we committed? We thought you would live here, the village would improve and so many other good things would happen. Will you leave us? Shattering our dreams, would you leave us in gloom? If you wanted to do this, why did you stay here at all? Why didn't you go to town that very day?" Blowing his nose, he trotted away quickly. With a bound the doctor reached him and led him back into the house.

"Aray! Look here! What will I do if even you get angry with me? Supposing I stay on as you wish. I might die tomorrow! What then! Will you sit on my chest and demand that I live?"

"No, not at all."

"Staying here would be a kind of psychological death for me. Being dead or alive would make no difference. Tell me, do you want me to stay here as a living corpse, or leave the village and live?" I know you have a heart of gold. But, as years pass, it might metamorphose in this poisonous environment to coal. To escape from that danger, there are only two ways I know: the quest for truth and the struggle for emancipation. These are the two essentials. When they disappear, man

ceases to be man and turns into a beast. If you respect me, remember this. I have nothing else to say or do."

"I take leave of you, doctor garu," he said and raised his hands in namaskaram. After he went the doctor sat thinking for a while. Then he continued with his packing. The clock on the wall struck nine. Climbing a high stool he took the clock down and packed that also. Meanwhile, the main door creaked. Without turning he asked, "Who is it?"

"Me."

"Who do I take to be 'me'?"

"Perhaps it is not proper for elders like you to kick corpses!"

"When you chose abortion, my status as an elder ended. How can it be retrieved now?"

"Then Yamadharma Raju⁶ will never forgive the fallen?"

"Who knows? It can be learnt only by asking Satyanarayana garu."

"If you ask him and inform me I shall remember your kindness for ever."

"Is it so difficult to find out from one who lives in the house?"

"If I am so fortunate why should I suffer your words?"

"Hasn't he been coming home?"

"Occasionally."

"Doesn't he talk with you?"

"_____"

"Where is he now?"

"Probably on the library pyol, singing."

The doctor turned quickly to her and asked, "Then Padma, isn't he sane?" Padma shook her head suggesting that he wasn't. "How long has he been so?"

"Since you left."

He didn't speak.

"It seems you are leaving the village?"

"Yes."

"Is it because you are angry with me?"

"With you? Angry?"

"Then why are you leaving?"

"Yes, I am leaving in a rage because of you. Have you come to stop me?"

"No, I have come to tell you that I am ready to elope with you. Won't you take me away with you?"

"Padma, you know my nature, and I know yours. Tigers may change their nature, but our characters will not. Knowing that, I see no point in hurting each other. Tell me frankly what you want, I shall do it if I can, otherwise, I'll say I can't. There's a lot more packing to do."

"Why should I trouble you so much? Permit me to take leave of you. Whenever possible, in your tranquil moments, remember that a person like Padma is being scorched in the flames of social custom. As for me, I am a fallen woman. I don't deserve even to think of noble persons like you," she started to move away.

"Padma, stop a moment! If you hadn't come, I could have been happy. But you have come. Having done so, if you go away without telling me what you have come here for, it would be such torture. If it is your wish to do so, go away. Else, tell me what is on your mind."

"Shall I tell you?"

"That's what I am asking you."

"Please tell me how he might regain his mental balance. At least tell me where he should be treated. I want nothing more than this."

The doctor thought for a while, rubbing his ear.

"Wait for a couple of months. Don't give him any medicine, it may cure itself. I'm sure it will clear up completely. You have to be patient, of course, and stay calm without troubling him in any way. If he still doesn't get well, treatment of any sort would be futile."

At the door she prostrated⁷ before him in adoration and rising to her feet walked away abruptly. The doctor was stunned. Then he got up, locked the door and went directly to Kusalayya's. He woke him up and asked him to hire two carts to transport his luggage to town. He woke up Appalawamy and said, "I have to go into town, get the cart." On his return, he saw someone on the pyol of the house.

"Who is it? Ramarao?"

"Yes, it's me doctor garu."

"Haven't you gone home?"

"Home! Where is home?"

"Why do you speak so? Has anything bad happened in the meanwhile?"

"Doctor garu, I spoke some harsh words in the jutka. Please forgive me. What you said is entirely true. It is difficult to live in this cesspool of sin for even a single moment."

"What happened?" the doctor asked anxiously.

"The house you endowed to Polayya's family — they have bought it again for five thousand. Who can do anything in the village? Why should we lament that somewhere in America something is done to the coloureds and that laws of segregation are imposed on Indians in South Africa? What happened here today? They have established the sacred Indian dharma."

"Is that all? It's such a relief. I was afraid that someone's life was in danger."

"After this has happened, what is life worth, doctor garu? Is it for this that you bequeathed your house?"

"But who bought it?"

"Sardar Pullayya."

"Better than their attacking Polayya's house and clubbing them all to death. Be happy that that did not happen. So, you have been watching all these goings on, have you? At least now, go home. Your mother who has just recovered will be anxious to see you. Listen to what I tell you."

"All the bonds you mention have ceased with this transaction. I thought I should see you once before going away. All right, permit me to leave."

The doctor knew that Ramarao was very stubborn. Unable to do anything, he stopped Ramarao, saying, "Look here, Ramarao, I too am coming with you." Meanwhile Appalawamy and Kusalayya brought the carts. The luggage in the house was lifted on to the bullock carts and the door locked. Asking Kusalayya to hand the keys over to Ammayamma garu, and to follow them to town, Ramarao and the doctor set off in the horse cart that very night.

Following the function and after attending to other affairs, it was 10 o' clock by the time Sardar Pullayya arrived home. Rangamma and Jaggarao were asleep. Lakshamma alone was awake. He washed his feet and lay down. She didn't know that Ramarao had come to the village. Nor did he tell her. She was glad about her husband's felicitation and said, "Dharma alone wins. This is an example for the whole world."

"True. What, other than truth and dharma, can win?" said Pullayya.

That night, lying on the pyol of the library, Satyanarayana Panthulu sang in his melodious voice:

*Yadaa yadaahi dharmasya glannirbhavati Bharata,
Abhyuththaanamadharmasya tadaatmaanam srijaamyaham
Parithraanaaya sadhunaam vinaasaya ca dushkritaam
Dharma samsthaapanaarthaaya sambhavaami yuge yuge.*⁸

*Whenever there is a decline of righteousness, O Bharata,
And a rise of unrighteousness, then I manifest myself.
For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked,
And for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age
to age.*

ONE

1. Panchayat Board : the lowest unit of the local self-government, charged with village administration.
2. salakalu : a salaka is a measure of grain. Seven salakulu is approximately four kilograms.
3. black hair ... their heels : this is meant to be ornamental, but also believed to ward off the evil eye.
4. Marwadi : a traditional North Indian money-lender, who charges high rates of interest and is merciless in extorting his dues.
5. sanyasi : a religious mendicant, who renounces the world and all attachments.
6. cloud messages : in Kalidasa's *Meghadootam*, a love-lorn sprite sends a message to his beloved through a cloud. Here, the wife and husband address the walls to communicate with each other.
7. tatayya : grandfather.
8. ammo! : an exclamation of fear.
9. amma : mother.
10. cha! : an exclamation of disapproval/doubt.
11. nayanamma : father's mother.
12. nanna : father.
13. ammi : an endearment
14. atta : mother-in-law.
15. aadabidda : husband's sister.
16. dharma : righteousness; justice or duty.
17. amritham : the drink of the gods that makes them immortal; here, it suggests sweetness.
18. Lakshmi, Saraswathi : Hindu goddesses of wealth and learning.

19. vadina : sister-in-law.
 20. Jaggadu : a nick-name for Jaggarao.
 21. Anjaneya-swamy : Hanuman, a devotee of Lord Rama, the monkey-god is worshipped in his own right.
 22. jutka : horse-drawn cart.

TWO

1. rach-chabanda : a common meeting place in the village, where the elders sometimes hold council to decide important matters.
 2. Pantulu : Pantulu is a caste name for a brahmin, it is also used as a vocative.
 3. shavukaru : a rich man; also, a synonym for "master."
 4. garu : a term of respect, used at the end of a person's name.
 5. amma! : also indicates surprise, disgust etc.
 6. putlu : it is a measure of grain, about 224 kgs.
 7. anna : a sixteenth part. Sixteen annas made a rupee.

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THREE

1. Bridge : the southernmost tip of peninsular India, where a bridge was supposed to have been built by Lord Rama to enter Lanka.
 2. tiger ... goat : tiger hunts in India were often organised by tying up a goat as a bait at the base of a large tree atop which armed hunters waited. In other words the predator has no sympathy for the prey.

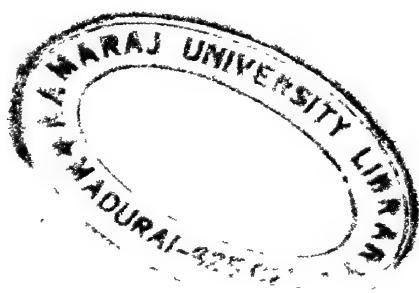
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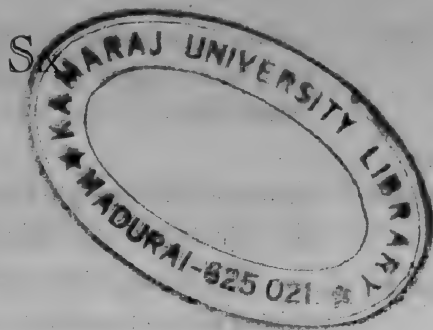
1. pyol : a raised platform attached to a house, on which people sat or slept.

2. **uttareeyam** : a long narrow folded length of cloth worn by men as an upper garment on all formal occasions.
3. **Tirupathi Venkanna** : Lord Venkateswara, whose temple is located in the hills near Tirupathi in Andhra Pradesh.
4. **paita-kongu** : the long fringe of the sari covering the upper part of the body and worn across the shoulders.
5. **saibu** : in Telugu, an ordinary Muslim citizen.

FIVE

1. **Bharat** : the ancient name for India.
2. **chavadi** : a place of business, where the village elders hold public court.
3. **Potti Rammayya** : short, referring to Rammayya's height.
4. **maama** : uncle, a common form of address.
5. **bull ... right** : when bulls are harnessed and yoked, there are fixed points for their fastenings.
6. **Kali Yuga** : in Hindu cosmology the fourth and last epoch of time, the others being Krita, Dwapara and Treta. Deceit, aggression and strife are the chief features of Kali Yuga.
7. **cheroot** : the word is derived from the Tamil "suruttu" which means a curl.
8. **neem-stalk** : traditionally used to brush teeth. Chewing one end of it makes it bristly, which is then used as a brush.
9. **oray** : a casual way of addressing people who are younger or of a lower rank.
10. **coolie** : a manual labourer who offers his services for daily wages.





- 1-5. Harijan
movement,
Suthra Yagna,
Salt
Satyagraha,
boycott of
foreign clothes,
propagation of
Hindi : various movements started by Gandhiji at
different times during India's struggle for
freedom.
6. A country ...
people : a line from the famous poem on patriotism
written by Gurazada Apparao (1862-1915), a
pioneer in discussing social problems through
literature.
7. harijans : the lowest stratum of orthodox Hindu society,
traditionally outcastes, untouchables; so Gan-
dhi named them "People of God." Hari = God
(One of the many names of Lord Vishnu); jan =
people.
8. Maalas : in this story, one of the two castes of untouch-
ables, the other being Madiga.
9. raithu : a farmer.
10. khadder : khadi or cloth woven with the yarn spun by
oneself. Using khadi in place of foreign cloth
was symbolically important during the freedom
struggle.
11. achana-
gayalu : a game played by children with large smooth
pebbles, which are tossed up and caught and
balanced on the back of the hand.
12. Happiness
and sorrow
are the same : a famous line from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

SEVEN

1. karanam : an official who keeps accounts of all sorts relating to the village.
2. sastra : any branch of knowledge, or science, difficult to master.
3. bachalu : a game in which a thin flat stone is flung from a distance to strike some objects placed inside a circle.
4. vedhava : a term of abuse, like "rascal."
5. bava : brother-in-law.
6. paipancha : cloth worn on the upper part of the body over the shirt.
7. moollu : mooralu or moollu is the plural form. A moora is the length between the tip of the middle finger and the elbow.
8. seer : a seer is about 1400 grams.
9. Saguna
Brahman : godhead with anthropomorphic qualities.
10. Nirguna
Brahman : godhead without any attributes.
11. *Bhaja-govindam* : a devotional song composed by Adishankara (8th century A.D.).
12. peddabbayi : eldest son.
13. star : predictions based on one's name and star of birth are common in India.
14. new moon ...
son-in-law : an expression that means roughly the same as "Time and tide wait for no man."

EIGHT

1. nanna : father, also a term of endearment.
2. babu : an affectionate term for the young.

3. bujjai : a young one; a calf is also sometimes referred to in a similar affectionate way.
4. yemandi : usually a form of address denoting respect.
5. maamayya : father-in-law. The suffix 'ayya' denotes respect.
6. atthayya : mother-in-law.
7. kutchery : an office in the village that maintains village records and where certain legal matters are settled.
8. pancha : a length of material worn by men wrapped around and tucked in at the waist.

NINE

1. dhovati : same as pancha in chapter eight.
2. sunnipindi : a mixture of rice and black-gram powder, used like soap.
3. Dhanvantiri : the divine physician.
4. lagu : shorts.
- 220 5. sruthis : that which was heard; the status of divine revelation in Hinduism, that part of the Vedas that describes the concepts.
6. smrithis : that which is a retelling; recapitulation; memory. The part of the Vedas which enunciates the canons of law/code of behaviour.
7. kala : art.

TEN

1. Yemandoi : here a term of respect is used sarcastically.
- 2-4. Drona : Drona was preceptor to two warring princely families of the Kuru clan. The Kauravas (one hundred in number) refused to give their cousins, the five Pandavas, their rightful share of the kingdom. This conflict is the story of the *Mahabharatha*.

ELEVEN

1. Iswara : another name for Lord Siva, the destroyer of man's ego, body and sins; one of the three gods in the Hindu Trinity; the other two are Brahma the creator, and Vishnu the sustainer.
2. choultry : a place run on charity where travellers receive free accomodation and food.

TWELVE

1. Krishna's ...
of birth : prison. Hindu mythology narrates how Sri Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu was born in a prison.
2. annay : elder brother. The substantive is annayya.
3. purohit : a priest officiating at a marriage ceremony.
4. mantras : sacred words in a particular order, chanted regularly, believed to empower the chanter.
5. three knots : a sanctified thread, often strung with gold pendants is tied around the neck of the bride at the time of marriage. Three knots are tied as a pledge of sacred union.
6. harathi : a flame of camphor is waved in circles before newly weds to welcome them or before certain guests on auspicious occasions or in the worship of deities

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THIRTEEN

1. fruit ...
mouth : according to superstition when a fruit-tree is about to die it puts out distorted forms like the shape of a dog's muzzle.

FOURTEEN

1. shanthi : a ceremony to appease malevolent deities.

FIFTEEN

1. Doragaru : master, lord, ruler.
2. Malabar Police : a Special Reserve Police Force, famed for its brutality, used to be deployed to quell riots especially in the Andhra region.
3. squirrel's devotion : there is a story about the humble devotion of a squirrel which helped Lord Rama to build a bridge to Lanka. The squirrel rolled about in the sand, then dashed to the site to shake off whatever earth it had collected on its back. Charmed, Lord Rama stroked the squirrel. The three white stripes the common Indian squirrel bears are supposed to be Rama's finger marks.
4. zulum : violence against an individual organised by a group.

SIXTEEN

1. goondaism : a goonda is a hired thug.
2. varna system : traditional Hindu society was structured on social function. Based on birth, it was divided into four castes: Brahmins—scholars and priests, Kshatriyas—rulers and warriors, Vaisyas—traders, and Sudras—the menial labourers.

SEVENTEEN

1. Dharmaraja : the eldest of the five Pandavas, in the epic *Mahabharatha*, he was meek, forgiving and the embodiment of righteousness.
2. dammidi : a pie, the smallest coin of Indian currency during the British rule when a rupee = 192 pice.
3. babai : uncle, father's brother.

EIGHTEEN

1. **ethamu** : a structure to collect and raise water from a well, which works on the principle of a see-saw.
2. **rasa** : According to ancient Indian poetics and Bharata Muni, pleasure is generated by a work of art in the mind of an empathetic reader who has certain intuitive or inherited feelings, by the interplay of certain feelings, producing "rasas," or essences or juices which are nine in number. These rasas are sringara (romantic love), hasya (laughter), karuna (compassion), raudra (ferocity), veera (heroic), bhayanaka (fear), bibhatsa (disgust), adbhuta (wonder), shanta (serenity).
3. **darshan** : the act of gazing at a deity or a holy or great person.
4. **Ammayi** : daughter or girl; in vocative, the last syllable is lengthened.
5. **Panaka-larayudu** : the deity whose temple is in Mangalagiri in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh. A sweet drink made of jaggery and water (panakam) is offered to the deity as an oblation in fulfilling a vow. The drink is fed to the deity in a conch shell but he accepts only half of what is offered by each devotee. Here, the word is used as an equivalent to devourer.
6. **raga** : in Indian music, a series of notes which can be sung to a pattern, producing a melodious tune; a scale.
7. **sruti** : the base note of a raga or musical scale.
8. **tambalas** : certain Brahmin priests in Siva temples regarded as impure and ridden with superstitions, are not allowed to perform Vedic rites. Their authority is considered the authority of the ignorant.

9. sab : a form of the word "saheb" which is a term of respect. An elegant word during the Muslim rule, it remains in the language indicating the influence of the ruler's tongue on the subject language. Now used occasionally in familiar and good-humoured situations, or to denote respect.
10. Andamans : a frightful island prison to which political detainees were sent. They seldom returned.

NINETEEN

1. District Board : a body responsible for the development of a district which is a revenue and administrative unit.
2. horns ... tired : an influential man.
3. viselu : the plural for vise, a measure of weight, roughly equivalent to 1200 grams.
4. aray : a term used in addressing people who are younger or of a lower social status.
5. abbayi : son, boy.

TWENTY

1. pesaratlu : the plural of pesarattu which is made of the paste of ground green-gram and fried like a pancake on an iron griddle, garnished with pieces of finely cut green chillies, onion and ginger: a delicacy for breakfast in parts of Andhra Pradesh.
2. Salya the charioteer : Salya, the uncle of the Pandavas and the king of Madra desha, wanted to be on the side of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata* war. On his way to the Pandavas, Duryodhana and his brothers lured him and entertained him lavishly. In his inebriated condition, he promised to help the Kauravas. He was asked to be Karna's charioteer

because his loyalty was suspect. In the war Salya tried to demoralise Karna verbally because Karna was the only warrior who could match Arjuna. So the charioteering of Salya means a stab in the back.

3. Smearing ...
festival : it was common before festivals to smear the loose earthen floor of mud-houses with a thin paste of cowdung to make it hard and clean.

T WENTY-ONE

1. tillikalu : a tillika is an earthen saucer with oil and wick, used as a lamp. Tillikalu is plural.
2. howled ...
this : there is a common superstition that the howling of a dog presages a death in the family. The reference is to Pullayya's elder son. Pedda = elder.
3. Yama's
men : the servants of Yama, the god of death. It is believed that when a person's life comes to an end, Yama sends his retinue to carry the man's spirit to Yamaloka, the world of the dead where punishment is meted out according to the man's sins on earth.
4. abbabba : an exclamation denoting disgust and anger, etc.
5. niluvu
dopidi : offering everything one has on one's body to God, at the time one makes the vow.

T WENTY-TWO

1. karma : strictly, action. In Hindu philosophical belief, the result of our good or bad actions leads us to the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. The effect of karma could be sanchita (cumulative) prarabda (that which is suffered) and agami (carried over to the next birth).

2. lines ...
forehead : in the Hindu deterministic view of life, the Creator writes a person's fate before birth on his forehead. This is supposed to be one's destiny. There is also, besides astrology, the science of reading the lines on a newborn's forehead.
3. Rama-
chandra : the name of Lord Rama is used sometimes as an exclamation, especially, to denote one's innocence, disgust, suffering etc.
4. Saneshwara : Lord of Sani, Saturn. One of the nine planets in Hindu astrology, supposed to exert a malefic influence. It is worshipped to mitigate its destructive powers.
5. *Bhagavatha* : a lengthy mythological epic describing the birth and life of Lord Krishna. Here, a sarcastic reference to a long and intricate story.
6. Brahma-
ratha : the writing of Brahma, the Creator, is difficult to decipher. Only Brahma and the other gods can understand it. Here, Lalitha means abstruse writing.

T WENTY-THREE

1. Nizam : an area in Andhra Pradesh comprising Telangana and a few other places which were under the rule of the Nizam until the police action after Independence. People from parts of Andhra used to migrate there because living was cheaper as was property. Later "mulki" (resident) rules were passed to deprive the immigrants of their rights.
2. ardhaangi : wife, literally the other half of the body. One of the forms of Lord Shiva is Ardhanareeswara (half man and half woman) with Parvathi his wife as the left half. It represents the bipolar nature of the created world and emphasises the need to look upon woman as equal and complementary to man.

3. chavadi : a hut, a dwelling with a roof made of thatch; a shed, a streetside verandah, a hut.

TWENTY-SIX

1. ryot : farm labourer.
2. sannayi
melam : a band of traditional musicians who play the clarinet as the main instrument with other accompaniments.
3. cotton
seeds : a very nutrient cattle feed, very expensive. Here the seeds are offered as the last feed to the dead animal.
4. after ...
bathed : Hindus consider themselves defiled upon visiting a bereaved family to pay their last respects to the one who has passed away. They bathe as a purificatory ritual. Significantly, the life of a bullock is seen to be as valuable as that of a human being.
5. Rohini
karte : a fifteen day period in the Hindu almanac. Rohini karte falls in midsummer and hence is a very hot fortnight.
6. egani : a copper coin of the value of two pies or one-sixth of an anna. In the old Indian currency, 16 annas made a rupee.
7. Guvvala-
chenna : a line from *Guvvalachenna Sathakam*. A sathakam is a series of hundred (or more) poems which have no thematic unity, but are brought together by refrain and (often) the same metre. The tone in a sathakam is usually devotional or didactic. *Guvvalachenna* (which is also the refrain) *Sathakam* is supposed to have been written by Pattabhirama Kavi (16th century A.D.).

8. swan : a simile that likens the consciousness/soul to a swan.
9. tulasi : holy basil: it is a common practice among Hindus to soak the leaves of the holy basil in water and to pour a few drops of that water into the mouth of a dying person. Besides the sanctity attached to the plant, it is also supposed to possess powerful medicinal and curative qualities.

TWENTY-SEVEN

1. bundobast : police protection given to a person or a place in difficult or violent situations.

TWENTY-NINE

1. Ramarao : a modification of Lord Sri Rama's name.
2. Bharatam : the *Mahabharatha*. Here, a long and intricate story.
3. apsara : heavenly beauty.

THIRTY

1. Kistai : a form of Krishnudu, the boy's name.
2. Sakuntala : Sakuntala was the daughter of sage Viswamitra and the celestial courtesan Menaka. Abandoned by both her parents, she was brought up by sage Kanwa in his ashram. Dushyanta, king of Hasthinapura, married her, but by a curse of sage Durvasa, forgot her. Shakuntala's son Bharat was born in a forest and raised there. He shaped into a most courageous child. Kalidasa's greatest play *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* is based on this story, the outlines of which are found in the *Mahabharata*.
3. tapas : meditation to achieve some noble end or to invoke God's presence for a boon.

THIRTY-ONE

1. purushartha : there are four personal aims a Hindu strives for in life, namely dharma (duty, morality), artha (wealth, fame), kama (sensory and aesthetic fulfilment) and moksha (liberation, salvation).
2. Ammayya : a word expressing relief, after the achievement of an arduous task.
3. Your ...
soil : some pregnant women eat clay particularly the small hardened pieces found amidst grains of rice.
4. Sri Kalahasthiswara : Lord Siva whose abode is in Srikalahasthi. Srikalahasthi is about 100 km from Tirupathi in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh State.
5. All ...
you : these verses are from *Sreekalahastiswara Satakam* written by Dhoorjati. Dhoorjati known for his magically sweet verses was supposed to have been one of the eight court poets of Sri Krishnadevaraya who ruled the Vijayanagar Empire (1509-1529).
6. Like ...
flower : these objects — cloth, rope, serpent etc., are often cited as examples of the illusory quality of the perceptible world.

THIRTY-TWO

1. Ayyo! : an interjection to express regret, sorrow, etc.
2. kudithi : the water rice is washed in is allowed to ferment and other nutrients stirred into it; a drink for cattle.
3. fragile pots : likening the human body to a clay pot is a well-known simile in Eastern philosophy.

THIRTY-THREE

1. Ananda-bhairavi : the name of a musical scale or raga in South Indian music, used especially in songs expressing pleading or in lullabies.
2. ash : ash is used to scour vessels.
3. Jana ... jayahe : the opening line of the Indian national anthem composed by Rabindranath Tagore, meaning, "Hail to the One who rules in the hearts/minds of people..."

THIRTY-FOUR

1. ashrams : the four stages (ashrams) in a person's life according to the Hindu way of life are: brahmacharya (bachelorhood), grihastha (life of a householder), vanaprastha (retreat to forests) and san-yasa (total renunciation of worldly affairs).
2. Karna ... six : in the *Mahabharatha*, the only person who really equalled Karna in valour was Arjuna. But there were five other formidable forces acting against Karna to defeat him: Sri Krishna, Kunti, the God Indra, Mother Earth and Salya, his own charioteer.

THIRTY-FIVE

1. Andhra-desam : Telangana or the land of the Andhras.
2. khadder : Hindi for handspun/handwoven.
3. namaskaram : a way of greeting in which palms are pressed together and held at chest level.
4. rekulu : the petals of screw pine (*Mandamus Odoratissimus*) a plant with a heady scent. In some parts of India women wear its petals in their hair on special or festive occasions.

5. Vasu : Vasudeva Sastry's late wife. Her name probably was Vasudha or Vasundhara. This is a short form of the name.
6. Raju : the God of Death, believed to be a cosmic judge.
7. prostrated : literally, touching the ground with the eight parts of the body (saashtaanga): the forehead, hands, shoulders, breast and knees. Customarily, women perform a variant of this kind of adoration (pranaamam).
8. Yadaa ... yuge : well-known lines from the *Bhagavad Gita*, IV, 7-8, where the Divine reveals the secret and purpose of His many incarnations on Earth.



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<i>Bengali</i>	: Woodworm Subarnalata
<i>Gujarati</i>	: Henceforth Rear Verandah
<i>Hindi</i>	: The Song of the Loom
<i>Kannada</i>	: Bharathipura
<i>Tamil</i>	: Outcaste Pandavapuram Second Turn The Eye of God
<i>Marathi</i>	: Cocoon
<i>Oriya</i>	: The Survivor Face of the Morning
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<i>Telugu</i>	: Puppets



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Dark clouds of greed, vindictiveness and deceit sweep into the lives of a farming community in coastal Andhra Pradesh. A ruthless schemer succeeds at every stage, well-meaning people are mowed down and caste-hates erupt into sudden violence.

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